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‘HOW TO READ A ROMAN PORTRAIT’?  
OPTATIAN PORFYRY, CONSTANTINE AND THE *VULTUS AUGUSTI*

**Michael Squire**

*Abstract:* This article takes its lead from research into the ‘language’ of Roman portraiture. More specifically, it explores a work that literalizes the idea of ‘reading’ a Roman portrait (to quote Sheldon Nodelman’s classic phrase): a picture-poem by Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius – a much maligned poet active in the first decades of the fourth-century AD – that purports, through its iconotextual form, to visualize the countenance of the Emperor Constantine (*uultus Augusti*).

After a brief introduction to Optatian and his *œuvre*, the article offers a close reading of the third poem, demonstrating the sophisticated ways in which it probes the latent iconic potential of written script. What particularly interests me about this case study is its underlying paradox: on the one hand, Optatian boasts that his painted page will outstrip antiquity’s most celebrated painter (it ‘will dare outdo the waxes of Apelles’, *uincere Apelleas audebit pagina ceras*); on the other, the actual form of the picture seems to eschew mimetic modes of representation, rendering Constantine’s ‘portrait’ a geometric pattern. So how should we make sense of this image? What does the poem reveal about ideas of portraiture in the fourth century? And how might we contextualize Optatian’s abiding fascination with the limits of ‘seeing’ and ‘reading’?

In his seminal article, ‘How to read a Roman portrait’, Sheldon Nodelman confronted the intrinsic semiotics of the genre.<sup>1</sup> Where scholars have often championed the ‘true-to-life’ (even so-called ‘veristic’) qualities of late republican and imperial portraits,<sup>2</sup> Nodelman instead emphasized their status as *signa*.<sup>3</sup> Despite their careful attention to physiognomy and form, Roman portraits can never be taken at face-value, Nodelman argued. For what is so distinctive about Roman portraiture – indeed, what is wholly new ‘in the history of art’ – is its acute awareness of the spectator (Nodelman 1993: 21, 10):

Like all works of art, the portrait is a system of signs; it is often an ideogram of ‘public’ meanings condensed into the image of a human face. Roman portrait sculpture from the Republic through the late Empire – the second century B.C. to the sixth A.D. – constitutes what is surely the most remarkable body of portrait art ever created. Its shifting montage of abstractions from human appearance and character forms a language in which the history of a whole society can be read.

Since each element of a Roman portrait makes sense only in relation to every other, Nodelman likens the visual medium to a written or spoken ‘language’ of verbal communication. To understand the ‘formalized conventional references’, it follows, one has to approach the ‘abstract meaning-structure’ as ‘referential system’ (Nodelman 1993: 15, 18, 17): learning to view Roman portraiture means learning to ‘read’ it – to interpret/translate/decipher its historically contingent ‘system of signs’.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I explore an artwork that literalizes Nodelmann’s metaphor of ‘reading a Roman portrait’. My subject lies in a little-known Roman author of the early fourth century AD: Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, or ‘Optatian’ for short. More specifically, I set out to revisit just one of Optatian’s poems (poem 3) – a work that, delighting in both the lisible and visible nature of its *signa*, confronts viewer-readers with a purported portrait of the emperor Constantine [Figs. 5–8].<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although the author first aired his ideas much earlier (Nodelman 1975), the argument is most familiar from a subsequent version of the essay (Nodelman 1993).

<sup>2</sup> For the classic articulation of the claim, see von Hartel and Wickhoff 1895: 16: according to Wickhoff, Roman portraits ‘scheinen zu leben, und wir würden ihre Vorbilder, wenn sie uns auf der Straße begegneten, sogleich wiedererkennen’ (16). For the thinking – and an important scholarly rejoinder – see Giuliani 1986: esp. 11–24: as Giuliani concluded, ‘an dieser Einstellung hat sich bis heute wenig geändert’ (259, n.6). I have attempted to survey the bibliography on Roman portraiture and the history of its study in Squire 2014a: for some useful introductions, see e.g. Bazant 1995; Lahusen 1997; Borg 2005; Schollmeyer 2005: 31–3; Fejfer 2008; P. Stewart 2008: 77–107; La Rocca and Parisi Presicce 2011; Fittschen 2010 (an impassioned defence of methods of ‘Kopienrezension’); Lahusen 2010; Borg 2012. On the relationship between Greek and Roman traditions of portraiture, see also Jaeggi 2008: esp. 14–18. Specifically on the phenomenon of ‘verism’ (‘a system of formalized conventional references whose specific content and polemical point are defined positively by the evocation of desired associations, and negatively by implied contrast with other images bearing an opposed content’: Nodelman 1993: 15), see e.g. Gruen 1992: 131–82; Kleiner 1992: 31–47; Tanner 2000 (with detailed bibliographic review); Meister 2012: 28–41.

<sup>3</sup> On the vocabulary of *signa*, see P. Stewart 2003: esp. 20–8, 184–95 (with references to further bibliography).

<sup>4</sup> For the most developed attempt to explain the Roman ‘Bildsprache’ as ‘semantisches System’, see Hölscher 1987 (translated into English – with an important introduction by Jaś Elsner – as Hölscher 2004).

<sup>5</sup> In what follows, references to the poems of Optatian follow the edition of Polara 1973: I use Roman numerals to refer to the hidden *uersus intexti* (again retaining Polara’s numbering); for earlier editions, see Müller 1877 and Kluge 1926. There is as yet no English translation. For attempted Italian and (selected) French versions, however, see Polara 2004 (revising Polara 1976) and Bruhat 1999: 462–93; Ernst 2012: 1.21–63 offers a text and German translation of six poems (poems 1, 6, 10, 15, 21, and 25), complete with short commentaries.

What interests me about this picture-poem is its capacity to open up larger questions about portraiture, signs and the nature of visual (as indeed verbal) representation in the early fourth century AD. For at the heart of Optatian's artefact is the conceit that – through the very fabric of the poem's crafted letters – the poet might visualize the facial 'countenance' (*uultus*) of the emperor. Exploiting the latent iconic potential of poetry, Optatian creates something that exists between the realms of language and imagery – a 'facial' figure that calls for reading and viewing alike. But how should that gesture be understood? How does Optatian play with Roman ideas about portraits? And what might our case study suggest about shifting attitudes towards representation in the early fourth century?

## I. Face to face with Constantine: The multifaceted world of Optatian

Before introducing my particular case study, let me begin with a few words about its Latin poet. 'Optatian' is a little-known name among classical philologists, historians and archaeologists. Indeed, the few scholars who have examined his work have generally condemned it as 'trivial', 'ridiculous' and 'decadent'.<sup>6</sup> As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, the works of Optatian are ripe for reappraisal, and from a variety of different viewpoints: in terms of later Latin literary traditions, certainly; but also from the perspectives of fourth-century political, philosophical and theological history, not to mention contemporary visual culture.<sup>7</sup>

So who was Optatian, and what sorts of works did he compose? External evidence is frustratingly slight.<sup>8</sup> Two extant inscriptions have been used to reconstruct Optatian's civic career, the first (of contested date) showing that he was governor Achaëa, the second that he served as member of a priestly college in Rome (before AD 315, and most likely under Maxentius).<sup>9</sup> We also find two fourth-century literary

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Raby 1957 1:45; Bardon 1975: 453; Cameron 1980: 134. The entry in *Pauly's Realencyclopädie* is broadly representative of twentieth-century views, dismissing Optatian as 'the author of hare-brained frivolities in verse' (Helm 1959: 1928): 'Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius... ist der Verfasser hirnverbrannter Versspielereien, bei denen man ebenso staunen muß, dass ein Mensch auf derartige mühselig ausgetüftelte Künsteleien seine Zeit vergeuden und sie für Poesie halten konnte, wie daß er damit bei einem Kaiser Beifall zu finden vermochte'. 'Seen as acutely experimental and idiosyncratic,' Rees 2012: 46 rightly concludes, 'Optatianus is hardly accommodated in broad schemes of Latin panegyric or even Latin poetry generally'. For a review of bibliography up to 1988, see Smolak 1989; for more recent analyses, see Squire 2015b: esp. 88–90.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Squire 2015b; Squire fthc. a; Squire fthc. b; Squire and Whitton fthc. Among the most important reexaminations of Optatian's *œuvre* are the following: Doria 1979; Levitan 1985; Ernst 1991: esp. 95–142 (with discussion of poem 3 at 109–13); Cox Miller 1998: 122–6 (re-articulated in 2009: 48–52); Bruhat 1999; González Iglesias 2000; Edwards 2005; Rühl 2006; Hose 2007: esp. 548–51; Scanzo 2006; Okáčová 2006; Okáčová 2007; Letrouit 2007; Bruhat 2009; Pipitone 2012a: esp. 95–146; Wienand 2012a: 355–420; Wienand 2012b; Wienand 2012c; Peltari 2014: 75–84. An international workshop on the poetry of Optatian, held in July 2015, and hosted by the Internationales Kolleg Morphomata in Cologne, brought together an array of specialists for an interdisciplinary re-appraisal (cf. Wienand and Squire 2015): the subsequent book, based on the workshop discussions, will be the first edited volume dedicated to the poet (Squire and Wienand fthc.); two chapters discuss the third poem (Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc. and Männlein-Robert fthc.), and I have learned a great deal from discussions with their authors.

<sup>8</sup> The 21 most relevant *testimonia* are collected in Polara 1973: 2.1–6; see also the 'nota biografica' in Polara 2004: 25–6, and the brief discussion of Squire 2015b: 90–1. More detailed discussions include Seeck 1908; Barnes 1975; Smolak 1989; Bruhat 1999: 2–31; Wienand 2012a: 355–61. Wienand fthc. provides the most recent attempt to reconstruct the poet's 'curious career'.

<sup>9</sup> *SEG* 11.810 (= *AE* 1931.6); *CIL* 6.41314. Both inscriptions are discussed by Wienand fthc.: Wienand advances a compelling case for dating the inscribed statue-base from Achaëa to the years AD 326–329, on the grounds both of its epigraphic formulae and findspot.

references: Saint Jerome records that, in AD 329, Optatian ‘was released from exile after sending a remarkable volume (*insigne uolumen*) to Constantine’;<sup>10</sup> likewise, a table of *praefecti urbis Romae* between 254 and 354 informs us that ‘Publilius Optatianus’ held the office twice in the years 329 and 333.<sup>11</sup> Jerome’s talk of exile is confirmed by additional references within the corpus of 31 poems ascribed to the poet: if Optatian sometimes alludes to his ‘unjust lot’ (*sors iniqua*, 20a.22) and ‘sad destiny’ (*fata | tristia*, 2.11–12), he also associates it with a ‘false accusation’ (*falso... crimine*, 2.31; cf. 2.5–6).<sup>12</sup> Despite their best efforts, however, scholars cannot be sure of the exact chronology of Optatian’s works, nor the precise form of any anthology dispatched to Constantine:<sup>13</sup> as ever, we have only later manuscripts to work from, dating from between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. Although the extant corpus offers tantalizing glimpses into the relationship between poet and emperor – not least in the two letters purported exchanged between Optatian and Constantine<sup>14</sup> – the precise history must remain a matter of speculation.

**INSERT FIG.1 ROUGHLY HERE: Page Width**

The works of Optatian nonetheless offer an important – and underplayed – source for approaching the political, cultural and above all religious transformations of Constantine’s principate. The poems themselves can leave little doubt about the ingenuity of their author. Most intriguing are the ‘iconotextual’ qualities:<sup>15</sup> Optatian plays knowingly with ideas of reading and seeing; throughout the corpus, his self-declared *signa* oscillate between written and depicted ‘signs’.<sup>16</sup> In three examples, we find the poet imitating the picture-poems (*technopaegnia*) of Hellenistic Alexandria: by setting each letter within an evenly spaced grid, and by varying the number of letters in each line, Optatian exploits the outer shape of his verses to evoke the mimetic outlines of a water-organ [Fig. 1], an altar and a set of panpipes.<sup>17</sup> The same working principle seems to have led Optatian to his favourite design, this time laid out within a ‘gridded’ arrangement (and sometimes referred to as *carmina cancellata*).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Helm 1956: 232: *Porphyrius misso ad Constantinum insigni uolumine exilio liberatur*.

<sup>11</sup> *Chron. Min.* 1.68 (= Mommsen 1892: 65–9, at 68). If both sources have their dates right, the transformation from exile to *praefectus urbis* was swift indeed (cf. Barnes 1975: 175). An exile between AD *circa* 322–26 seems more likely: see Wienand 2012a: 355–6, n. 1, 371–3; Wienand fthc.

<sup>12</sup> On the exile motif in the poetry of Optatian, see Bruhat 1999: 16–20 and Wienand 2012a: esp. 359–60.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bruhat 1999: 31–43; Wienand 2012a: esp. 371–3.

<sup>14</sup> For the text of the two letters, see Polara 1973: 1.1–6. The letters have sometimes been thought later mediaeval forgeries (cf. Polara 1973: 1.xxxi–xxxii, 2.19–20). But there are good linguistic and contextual reasons for thinking them genuine: the fullest discussion is Bruhat 1999: 23–31 (concluding that, despite problems of style and content, ‘il ne semble pas possible de prouver que ces lettres sont des faux’, 31); for further bibliography, see Green 2010: esp. 69–71; Pipitone 2012b; Wienand 2012a: 358, n. 6.; Wienand fthc.

<sup>15</sup> For the language of the ‘iconotext’, see Wagner 1995: 12 and 1996: 15–17.

<sup>16</sup> For Optatian’s talk of *signa*, see Squire fthc. a. The language recurs throughout his works: cf. e.g. *uicennia signa* (4.1); *signare* (5.2); *signare* (6.34); *signatur* (7.12); *pia signa* (8.2); *insignia magna* (8.27); *salutari nunc haec tibi pagina signo | scripta micat* (8.i–ii); *insignit* (11.8); *aurea... insignia* (13.iii); *signa* (16.29); *suis signis* (18.23); *caelestia signa* (19.1); *signis... notare* (19.17); *signa... laetissima* (19.29); *aeternum... signum* (24.35).

<sup>17</sup> Poems 20, 26 and 27; poem 26 nicely labels the conceit *imagines metrorum* (26.23). For a more detailed discussion of the three poems – and their relationship to Hellenistic traditions of ‘picture-poetry’ – see Squire 2015b: 92–8.

<sup>18</sup> Optatian does not himself use the term, although the language is anticipated at 22.i–ii: ‘the Muses disperse verses that are intermingled either with circuitous windings or else with gridded bends that proceed in the opposite track’ (*mixta per amfractus diducunt carmina Musae, | seu cancellatos spatia in contraria flexus*).

Developing a penchant for acrostichs, mesostichs and telostichs, with verses that vertically trickle down the page,<sup>19</sup> Optatian once again breaks down his words into their constituent alphabetic units. In the *carmina cancellata*, however, the writerly space of the poem emerges as a sort of artistic canvas: by highlighting textured patterns within the grid, and depicting them in multiple colours, Optatian could tease out additional ‘signs’ from the fabric of his ground-text. If these ‘gridded poems’ consequently vacillate between words and pictures, the written/drawn *signa* sometimes also fluctuate between Latin and Greek languages: in three examples, the individual Latin letters add up to phrases that make semantic sense in Greek – whether yielding a single hexameter (poem 23), three hexameters (poem 16), or an elegiac couplet (poem 19).<sup>20</sup>

INSERT FIGS. 2–4 over the next page, and before the text/ translation of poem 3 (which needs to be uninterrupted by pictures): Each Page Width? Or else 2 per width if still clearly readable?

Optatian exploited the form of his *carmina cancellata* to experiment with different designs and rationales. The most common format, recurring ten times, revolves around a square grid comprised of 35 letters along both the horizontal and vertical axes (poems 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 18, 24).<sup>21</sup> In each case, Optatian looked to the internal space of the grid to figure various graphic forms, ranging from alphabetic and numerical letters, through abstract and ornamental patterns, to schematized mimetic forms.<sup>22</sup> The individual letters of the poem consequently function like the tessellated pieces of a mosaic; indeed, the very forms figured within the poems parallel the different verbal, decorative and iconic designs found in contemporary mosaics of the early fourth century.<sup>23</sup> Some of the figures amount to geometric shapes or apparent floral adornments (e.g. poems 2, 7, 12, 18, 21, 22 and 23). Others give rise to schematic pictures – a shield in poem 7, a palm frond in poem 9 [Fig. 2], and a *quincunx* army formation in poem 6. Still other examples sketch letters and numbers within the grid: so it is, for example, that the abbreviation *AVG. XX CAES. X* is embroidered within poem 5 (‘Augustus twenty [years], the Caesars ten’ – celebrating

<sup>19</sup> For introductions to the history of such acrostichs in Greek and Latin poetry, see Vogt 1966 and Courtney 1990, along with the more recent bibliography surveyed in Squire 2011: 216–28, esp. 225–7.

<sup>20</sup> On poem 16, see below, pp. XX–XX; for the Greek couplet hidden in the Latin hexameters of poem 19, see below, n. XX. The interlinguistic feat depends not simply upon transliteration, but upon reading letter-forms by different alphabetic rules: C, for instance, doubles as sigma, H as eta, P as rho, X as chi; Greek forms without Latin equivalent are supplied by proxy, whether logical (‘T’ provides theta as well as tau) or visual (‘A’ does duty for delta and lambda, as well as for alpha). Optatian’s intermingling of Greek with Latin languages finds contemporary parallels: among the most dazzling is Ausonius’ macaronic 45-verse epistle to Paulus, written a little later in the fourth century, and playfully mixing Latin and Greek in its ‘two-tongued conversation’ (*sermone... bilingui*: Auson. *Epist.* 6.2, with commentary in Green 1991: 614–17; for further discussion and bibliography, cf. Pastorino 1971: 119–21).

<sup>21</sup> Five other poems amount to related gridded shapes of various (and sometimes uneven) dimensions: poem 9 [36 letters down: 37 letters across], poem 12 [18: 35], poem 19 [38: up to 38], poem 21 [16: up to 43] and poem 22 [10: 36]. Doubts have been raised about the authenticity of both poems 22 and 24, but the situation is complex, and there are good reasons for thinking both – if not Optatianic – at least fourth-century in date (cf. Squire and Whitton *ftbc.* on poem 24).

<sup>22</sup> For the categories (‘geometrische Gittergedichte’, ‘literale *carmina cancellata*’, and ‘gegenstandsmimetische Gittergedichte’), see Ernst 1991: 108–35; cf. Bruhat 1999: 134–70; Rühl 2006: 81–82 (‘graphische Muster’, “‘Bilder’” and ‘neue Buchstaben’).

<sup>23</sup> On the parallels between Optatian’s poetry and contemporary fourth-century mosaics, see especially Bruhat 1999: 136–41 (with reference to poems 7, 12, 18, 21, 22 and 23); more generally on the analogy between late-antique poetry and tessellated mosaics, the classic analysis is M. Roberts 1989: esp. 57, 70–3.

the twentieth imperial anniversary of Constantine and the *decennalia* of his two sons in the year 326); likewise, in poem 8, the name *IESVS* is spelled out around an emblazoned chi-rho christogram [Fig. 3].<sup>24</sup> Poem 19 is arguably the most complex of all, bringing together different rationales [Fig. 4]. In visual terms, the grid yields a ship (complete with tiller, rudder, oars and ramming spike), topped with a mast and sail in the shape of a chi-rho. While the image of this poem is drawn from highlighted Latin letters, additional alphabetical forms are emblazoned within its pictorial space, spelling out *VOT* above (an abbreviated reference to the *uota* or ‘vows’ mentioned at 19.4, 12, 13, 26, 31, 35), and an *XX* below (figured within the ship’s hull, and alluding numerically to the twentieth anniversary of the emperor, as well as the ten-year jubilees of his two sons). Most remarkably of all, the Latin letters that make up the ship’s mast, sail, tiller and rudder conceal a Greek couplet: hidden within the ground-text, the constituent letters of the image furnish a ‘paratextual’ commentary on the visual picture seen.<sup>25</sup>

INSERT FIGS 5–8 over the next few pages (can go into section 2 if needed). Each full page- can be in succession. Please make sure text and translation of Latin is not interrupted.

It is within this framework of *carmina cancellata* that my specific case study – the third poem within the corpus – should likewise be understood. I illustrate the poem via a new typeset rendition [Fig. 5], as well as through three extant manuscript presentations [Figs. 6–8]: first, a page of an early sixteenth-century codex in the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (where the internal patterns are marked in red and through yellow block-highlighting); second, a ninth-century folio in Bern that this time writes its letters in lower-case script (using orange to distinguish the internal letters and to bind them together); and third, a late fifteenth-century manuscript in Munich where gold lines set out the internal pattern (with all the letters written in majuscule quadrata script, and in black).<sup>26</sup> Since – so far as I know – the poem has never before been translated into English, let me begin with a first attempt, following the ‘knotty’ (*nodosos*, v.30) forms of Optatian’s Latin syntax:<sup>27</sup>

*Fingere Musarum flagrare numine uultus,  
alme parens orbis, perfecta in munia uersu  
uotaque, si ratio non abnuat ordine Phoebi.  
gesta canunt, quos Aonium placabile numen*

<sup>24</sup> Optatian characteristically blurs any straightforward distinction between the alphabetical and the ornamental – nowhere more so than in his chi-rho forms: see below, pp. XX–XX, along with Squire and Whitton fthc.

<sup>25</sup> On the iconic form and significance of the hidden Greek text which makes up the mast, sail and tiller/rudder of the picture, see Bruhat 2009 and Squire 2015b (with translation of the poem and further bibliography). The transliterated Latin text yields the following Greek couplet: τὴν ναῦν δεῖ κόσμον, σὲ δὲ ἄρμενον εἶναι νομίζω | θούροις τεινόμενον σῆς ἀρετῆς ἀνέμοις (‘One must think that the ship is the world, and that you are the hoisted rigging, tautened by the strong winds of your virtue’).

<sup>26</sup> For a description of the various manuscripts (albeit without illustrations), see Polara 1971: 7–35; there are brief commentaries on the different presentational formats in Wienand 2012a: 364 and Squire fthc. b. Figs. 6–8 are taken from Codex Guelferbytanus 9 Augustaneus 4<sup>o</sup> (which Polara 1971 labels ‘W’), Codex Bernensis 212 (‘F’) and Codex Latinus Monacensis 706<sup>a</sup> (‘M’). The third poem features in all the most important manuscripts: cf. Polara 1971 (summarized in Polara 1973: 1.vii–xxxiv and 2004a: 33–8); Ernst 1991: 209–21; Wienand 2012a: 371–3. Limitations of space likewise prevent me from discussing the Carolingian and mediaeval reception of Optatian’s works: in addition to Ernst 1991: esp. 143–842 (with overview at 831–842), see e.g. Kluge 1924: 328–336, Higgins 1987: 25–53; cf. below, n.XX.

<sup>27</sup> The only translations known to me are those of Bruhat 1999: 467 (French) and Polara 2004: 68–71 (Italian). I am grateful to Christopher Whitton for his extensive help in untangling the syntax.

*uatis sorte frui dat; donis carminis ex hoc* (5)  
*sustollens et uersu instigans ora sonare,*  
*tu mentem inspiras uatis; tu gaudia semper*  
*in te, sancte, uocas. tu quiuis docta Camenae*  
*edere dicta fauens, tu laetus uota secunda,* (10)  
*ut rata sint, audis; tua mitis rector Olympi*  
*tempora praecipua seruat pietate serena.*  
*aurea iam toto, uictor, tua saecula pollent,*  
*Constantine, polo. hace nexus lege solutis*  
*dicturus metris magno mouet agmine Musas,* (15)  
*at mea uix pictis dum textit carmina Phoebi*  
*Calliope modulis, gaudet, si uota secundet*  
*Delius, intexta ut parili sub tramite Musa*  
*orsa iuuat, uersu consignans aurea saecula.*  
*sed tibi deuotam rapiunt ad gaudia mentem* (20)  
*audenterque loqui suadent per deuia uoto*  
*Aonides fretae, et, quantis sua uerba tueri*  
*legibus adstrictae, te tota mente fideque*  
*uatis uoce tui, tua, princeps inclite, tanta*  
*bella canunt, et Pegaseo noua carmina potu* (25)  
*exercent, nexuque uolunt nunc rite sonare*  
*egregium imperium, tanto cur munere fungi*  
*et praecelsa iuuat uersu per scrupula fari.*  
*mentis opus mirum metris intexere carmen*  
*ad uarios cursus; uix, arto in limite clausa,* (30)  
*nodosos uisus artis cata praeferat ex hoc,*  
*et tamen ausa loqui tanto mens aestuat ore,*  
*nec dignum uotis carmen sie reddere retur,*  
*tali lege canens; quae nostrum pagina sola,*  
*ex Helicone licet, conplebit, munus amoris,* (35)  
*picta elementorum uario per musica textu.*

I would be burning to fashion your face in verse with the power of the Muses, kindly father of the world, in fulfilment of my duties and prayers, should my scheme (*ratio*) not depart from the rule of Phoebus. They sing of deeds, whom the kindly Aonian power permits to enjoy the lot of a bard; thereafter, elevating them with gifts for poetry and encouraging mouths to resound with verse, you inspire the mind of the bard; you constantly call joys, holy one, to yourself; you, encouraging him in every way to produce learned words of the Muse, you joyfully hear favouring vows, so that they may be ratified; your age the gentle ruler of Olympus preserves serene with special piety.

(12) Your golden age, victorious Constantine, is now mighty in all the world. He who would tell all this in metres freed from the law of the weave moves the Muses in a great herd; but *my* songs, as Calliope weaves them with difficulty in Phoebus' painted measures, she rejoices if the Delian would favour my vows, so that the Muse may help my woven endeavours along an equal path, sealing the golden age in verse.

(19) But the Aonian Muses, trusting in the vow, transport into joy the mind devoted to you and bid him speak boldly through untrodden paths; and, as strict the laws that bind them to take care of their words, they sing of you, glorious *princeps*, and your wars so great, with all heart and faith through the voice of your bard, and they work new songs with Pegasean draught, and want now duly



to sound the glorious empire in their weave, for they delight to perform so great a task and to speak forth in verse along rocky heights.

(28) A wondrous work of the mind, to weave a song into the verses in various directions: trapped in narrow confine, it [the mind] might scarce carry the knotted visions of its art, clever though it be, beyond that confine; and, daring nevertheless to speak with such mighty mouth, my mind is in turmoil, and thinks not to offer up a poem worthy of its vows, singing by such a law, vows which my duty of love will fulfil, a page – only one, though it come from Helicon – painted according to the Muses' lore with varied weave of elements.

Readers will quickly see the connection with my opening comments about 'how to read a Roman portrait'. The object that faces us may look rather different from the sorts of painterly portraits with which classical archaeologists usually deal – whether sculpted busts, mosaics or painted images like the imperial 'mummy-portraits' remarkably preserved in Fayoum [e.g. Fig. 9].<sup>28</sup> And yet, in this explicit address to Constantine, Optatian suggests that the very form of his poem might emulate a painted portrait of the emperor: the opening theme is the *uultus* of Constantine (v.1), and the poem makes much of its promise of materialising that form in verse (*uersu*: vv. 2, 6, 18, 27).

**INSERT FIG.9 HERE: Half-column?**

We will return a little later to the schematic graphic pattern of the grid. For now, I restrict myself to two preliminary observations. First, we should note that the poem does not supply any precise information about date. The only clue comes in vv.12–13: Optatian here describes Constantine as 'victor', one whose 'golden age' is now prevailing 'in the all world' (*aurea iam toto, uictor, tua saecula pollent, | Constantine, polo*). Although beyond proof, the reference most likely suggests a date soon after Constantine's victory over Licinius in AD 324; if so, the whole encomium might be understood as an allusion to Constantine's *Vicennalia* in AD 325–326 (an anniversary which Optatian celebrates in several other poems).<sup>29</sup>

Second, and no less importantly, the poem draws attention to its material appearance on the page. Not only are individual letters marked out within the grid, but those letters can be read in their own written right. Once we transform the tessellated units back into words, we find six additional hexameters. Two of these are derived from the poem's horizontal and vertical crux, the one forming a mesostich at the symmetrical centre (from top to bottom in the eighteenth column), the other occupying the symmetrical horizontal axis (in line with the eighteenth verse).<sup>30</sup> To read the other four hexameters, audiences must zigzag across the grid: in each case, we have to start near the outer corner and then proceed in a variety of horizontal, vertical and diagonal directions.<sup>31</sup> Because the lines are arranged spatially, there is no

<sup>28</sup> For the materials from Fayoum, see especially Doxiadis 1995, Borg 1996 and Walker and Bierbrier 1997. On Fig. 9 specifically, see Thompson 1982: 42–3, no. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Polara 1973: 2.34–5 (discussing earlier opinions), with 36 on 3.12–13; Barnes 1975: 178; Ernst 1991: 109; Bruhat 1999: 501; Wienand 2012a: 386, 390–1. Edwards 2005 attempts to date this and other poems with respect to the developing complexity of their *uersus intexti* designs: concerning our poem, Edwards concludes that the visual pattern, together with the references to the victorious Constantine, suggest that 'the poem can be placed among the early presentation pieces' (454).

<sup>30</sup> The central cross-shape of Optatian's third poem is paralleled in other *carmina cancellata*: quite apart from the chi-rho shapes of poems 8, 14, 19 and 24, note especially the use of the same device in poem 2 (where the central intersecting lines both repeat the hexameter that frames all four sides of the grid) and in poem 18 (where the central crux intersects with additional cross-shapes within the poem).

<sup>31</sup> The idea of the poem as a spatial 'path' – and one that allows the reader to move in multiple directions – recurs throughout the poem: in addition to vv.28–29 (*mentis opus mirum metris intexere*

fixed order for reading them; likewise the two verses that form the central crux of the poem can be read either before or after the other four.<sup>32</sup> The Latin syntax nonetheless suggests the following arrangement:

*Fingere Musa queat tali si carmine uultus  
Augusti, et metri et uersus lege manente,  
picta elementorum uario per musica textu  
uincere Apelleas audebit pagina ceras.  
grandia quaerentur, si uatis laeta Camena  
orsa iuuat, uersu consignans aurea saecula.* (v)

Were the Muse able to fashion the face of Augustus in such song, with the law of metre and verse unbroken, the page, painted according to the lore of the Muses with varied weave of elements, will dare outdo Apellean waxes. (v) Great things will be sought, should the joyful Muse favour her bard's endeavours, sealing the golden age in verse.

If two of these hexameters repeat lines from the main text (3.vi = 3.18; 3.iii = 3.35), the others subtly recycle the constituent letters, words and syntactical phrases of the ground-text. Although they do not this time address Constantine directly, the verses deliver an encoded message to the reader; what is more, they once again comment upon the feat of crafting the 'countenance of Augustus' (*uultus Augusti*). There can be no doubting the self-referential thinking: in a mise-en-abyme of metapoetic reflections, this poem within the poem offers an additional commentary on the text that contains it; we are dealing, in short, with a *carmen* that responds to the 'sort of song' (*tali carmine*) from which it derives (cf. v.5: *carminis*; v.15: *carmina*; v.24: *carmina*; v.28: *carmen*; v.32: *carmen*). Perhaps most revealingly of all, Optatian relates the feat to one of classical antiquity's most celebrated artists. This fourth-century AD Latin poem asks to be viewed against the precedent of Greek painting in the fourth century BC: the painted page (*picta... pagina*), we are told, will dare outdo the wax-pictures of the great Apelles himself (*Apelleas... ceras*).<sup>33</sup>

## II. Medial reflections: 'The law of the weave'

The Apellean reference is in fact just one of many allusions to the 'pictorial' status of the poem. Of course, the whole work amounts to a panegyric hymn in honour of the emperor – 'victorious Constantine', the 'kindly father of the world', 'glorious princeps', ruler of the 'glorious empire' (*uictor... Constantine*, vv.12–13; *alme parens orbis*, v.2; *princeps inclite*, v.23; *egregium imperium*, v.26). Throughout, though, the glorious 'feats' of the emperor (*gesta*, v.4) are interwoven with musings about the

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*carmen* | *ad uarios cursus*; 'a wondrous work of the mind, to weave a song into verses in various directions'), note e.g. *parili sub tramite* (v.17: 'along an equal path') and *per deuia* (v.20: 'through untrodden paths').

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ernst 1991: 109: 'Im Unterschied zu Carmen II fehlt hier ein quadratischer Intextrahmen, weil die seitenbegrenzenden Intexte nicht linear verlaufen, sondern auf halben Weg nach innen abknicken, so daß sich in Verbindung mit der zentralen Kreuzfigur vier Hexagone mit gleicher Letternmasse konstituieren'.

<sup>33</sup> For ancient literary references to Apelles, see *DNO* 4.125–205, nos. 2846–990. Edwards 2005: 454 is mistaken, in my view, to think that the poem's hidden verses simply 'contain witty phrases unrelated to each other or to the content of the main body of the poem, phrases that seem rather to have been designed specifically to amuse'.

intermedial workings of our painter-poet – the *uatis* who makes those deeds known throughout the world.<sup>34</sup>

For all its nods to the emperor, this is an artefact that reflects knowingly on its feat of literary and artistic composition.<sup>35</sup> Before tackling the issue of ‘reading’ the poem’s ‘portrait’, I therefore begin by exploring the verbal imagery with which Optatian draws out his project. I restrict myself here to just six themes: each concerns a specific characteristic of the metapoetic – as indeed metapictorial – commentary of our text; cumulatively, however, these ‘medial reflections’ will form the backdrop for my subsequent remarks about the pattern figured within.

My first observation concerns the explicit presentation of this work as poem and picture alike. Of course, the bulk of the text is dedicated to the challenges of poetic composition.<sup>36</sup> One thinks of vv.17–18, for example, which talk of arranging the ‘woven endeavours’ (*intexta... orsa*) ‘along an equal path’ (*parili sub tramite*) – that is, of ensuring each vertical and horizontal line is made up of an ‘equal’ number of 35 letters. When Optatian elaborates on the metrical ‘laws that bind the poet to take care of his words’ (*quantis sua uerba tueri | legibus adstrictae*, vv.21–2), the thinking proves to be no less metaliterary: after all, the poet must keep an eye on not only the number of lettered constituents in each line, but also the metrical lengths of his *uerba*. Yet the commentary of the poem does not concern poetry alone. For alongside his reflections on literary composition, Optatian also draws attention to the ‘painterly’ dimensions at work. In vv.15–16, the poet expressly refers to ‘painted measures’ (*pictis... modulis*), just as v.35 constructs the page as something ‘painted’ (*picta* – reused in 3.vi).<sup>37</sup> Still more explicit is the reference to the ‘knotted visions of art’ (*nodosos uisus artis*, v.30). Optatian here relies on the multiple connotations of the term *ars* – a word (like *technê* in Greek) that can refer to feats of literary and artistic craftsmanship alike. At the same time, he emphasizes the visual dimension of his written text: we are dealing with something not just to be read, but also to be *seen*.

In this connection, second, it is worth noting the poetic-pictorial conceit underlying the ‘golden age’ of Constantine. Optatian emphasizes this idea at two places within the poem (*aurea... saecula*, v.12; *aurea saecula*, v.18), capitalizing on a long-standing tradition of imperial panegyric;<sup>38</sup> in its repetition of v.18, the

<sup>34</sup> On the relationship between Optatian’s poem and late-antique traditions of panegyric, see the hugely stimulating analysis of Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc.: as the authors remind us, the task of panegyric was frequently compared with that of painting; likewise, there are parallels for adducing the example of Apelles himself (cf. Rees 2013: esp. 116–21).

<sup>35</sup> For a broader introduction to ‘Optaziano metapoeta’, see Pipitone 2012a: 95–146.

<sup>36</sup> Those difficulties are most conspicuous in the use of single letters to make up not just two words, but even three: in verse 10, the letter A is recycled three times in the words *tua*, *quaerentur* and *tali*; likewise, in v.26, the same letter can again be found in the words *tanto*, *laeta* and *uario*.

<sup>37</sup> For other references to Optatian’s ‘painterly’ creations, see e.g. 1.4 (*picto limite dicta notans*); 4.7 (*uicennia picta*); 5.7–8 (*Musa | ...pingit*); 5.25 (*spe pinget carmen*); 5.26 (*uersu... picto*); 5.iii (*pingens... mea Camena*); 6.34 (*depictis... metris*); 7.7 (*picto sub carmine*); 8.1–2 (*picta nouis elegis... | clementis pia signa dei uotumque perenne*); 10.9 (*pingentem* – although the reading is debated, cf. Polara 1973: 73–4); 18.21 (*pictorum*); 19.20 (*arte notis picta*); 22.9 (*pingit*, repeated in 22.12); 22.viii (*bene picta Musa metris*); 22.xiii–xiv (*picta notabo | iura Camenis*).

<sup>38</sup> For the celebration of Constantine’s ‘golden age’ (*aurea saecula*), cf. 5.28, 7.24, 14.19, 15.6, 19.2, 19.32 – with discussion in Rühl 2006: 79 and Wienand 2012a: 373–60. The second poem delights in a similar game as the third, this time explicitly signaled in its choice of verb (*disponere*): contained within the grid – which is surrounded on all four sides with the same request for the emperor to have mercy on the exiled poet – are the words *aurea sic mundo disponas saecula toto* (‘May you thus set out in order your golden age throughout the whole world’, 2.ii; cf. Rühl 2006: 84–6). One might also compare the allusion to the *aurei saeculi restaurator* emblazoned in poem 10 (10.v); the ‘golden signs’ of poem 12 (*aurea... insignia*, 12.iii – in turn associated with the *felicis tempora saeculi*); and the

highlighted horizontal verse at the centre repeats the sentiment, telling how the poet ‘seals the golden age in his verse’ (*uersu consignans aurea saecla*, 3.v). But what should we make of this ‘goldenness’? Needless to say, we do not know how this poem was originally presented: our only evidence comes in the form of much later mediaeval manuscripts [Figs. 6–8].<sup>39</sup> It nonetheless seems important that, at least in other contexts, Optatian talks of the multicoloured hues of his poems: nowhere is this more vivid than in the first poem, where Optatian describes his œuvre as ‘written with letters that glitter in silver and gold’ (*argento auroque coruscis | scripta notis*, 1.3–4).<sup>40</sup> Were we to think – as seems likely – that some of the letters within our poem were likewise inscribed in gold [cf. Fig. 8], the very sentiment of the ‘golden age’ would have been manifested through the written form of the text.<sup>41</sup> The play on the word *consignans* (‘sealing’ – and thereby ‘establishing’, ‘indicating’ and ‘authenticating’), emblazoned along the crux of v.18 (*uersu consignans aurea saecla*), nicely champions the point: as combined poetic and pictorial *signa*, the marks on the page offer a visual literalization – which is to say also a literal visualization! – of an imperial ‘golden age’.<sup>42</sup>

A third, and again related, theme lies in the rhetoric of *elementa*. In the final line of the poem (v.35), Optatian refers to its ‘elemental’ units (*picta elementorum uario per musica textu*), playfully ‘varying’ the spatial layout of the same hexameter at the bottom of the page (3.iii): the artefact, we are told, is ‘painted according to the lore of the Muses with varied weave of elements’.<sup>43</sup> But what should we make of these *elementa*? By the time Optatian was writing, there was a long tradition of discussing the cosmological ‘elements’ of the universe in relation to the constituent units of language. In the first century BC Lucretius had turned to the example of alphabetic letters to expound his Epicurean theory of *elementa* (*DRN* 2.682–92; cf. 1.196–7): as the elemental building-blocks of linguistic expression, letters were analogous to the raw elements of nature.<sup>44</sup> This ‘atomistic’ view of language was

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reference to the ‘golden light’ in poem 18 (*aurea uictorem pietas sonat ubere lingua*, 18.iv). In each case, as in our third poem, the physical presentation of these *uersus intexti* may have materialized the figure of ‘goldenness’.

<sup>39</sup> On the manuscript traditions, see above, n. XX.

<sup>40</sup> For other related passages, see Bruhat 2009: 116 (with 115, n. 36 – citing 1.4, 3.35, 3.iii, 3.15, 4.7, 5.8, 5.25, 5.iii, 6.34, 7.7, 8.1, 18.21–19.20). More generally on the luxury codices of late antiquity, see Mazal 1999: 95–8 (mentioning Optatian at 96); Mratschek 2000; Zimmerman 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Admittedly, the scholia (on which see below, p. XX) refer to a cinnabar-red colour, not to a gilded presentation (*et est primus uersus minio per amfractum a prima littera usque ad ultimam litteram primi uersus*). But this reference need not apply to earlier presentations of the poem. It is perhaps also revealing that one manuscript (codex M: Codex Monacensis Latinus 706<sup>a</sup> [Fig. 8]) substitutes the word *minio* with *aureo*, in light of its own ‘golden’ presentation (cf. Pipitone 2012a: 36, with discussion of the same substitution in the context of the scholia on poem 2 at 32–3). Although we cannot be sure of the original presentation of Optatian’s poems, ‘indubbiamente, è naturale, la prima edizione doveva essere quella di lusso’ (Pipitone 2012a: 33 n.19).

<sup>42</sup> Optatian’s talk of *pagina* (v.33, iv) seems significant, and is paralleled in numerous other passages (cf. 4.2, 4.9, 7.11, 8.i, 9.13, 19.4, 19.35; for *charta*, cf. 1.7). As Wienand 2012a: 364 writes, it is plausible ‘dass damit lose Seiten gemeint sind, möglich – und wohl insgesamt wahrscheinlicher – ist aber auch, dass die einzelnen *paginae* zu einem Codex gebunden waren’ (cf. also Ernst 1991: 141; Ernst 2012: 1.59–60). More generally on the development of the codex, see e.g. C.H. Roberts and Skeat 1983; Blanck 1992: 75–101; Mazal 1999: 125–51; Stanton 2004; Schipke 2013: esp. 143–52; cf. Engels and Hofman 1997a: 67–76.

<sup>43</sup> For related references to the *elementa* of Optatian’s creations, see 20b.9, 26.22 – with more detailed discussion in Squire fthc. a.

<sup>44</sup> For discussion of the Lucretian passages (and analysis of the earlier intellectual debts that inform them), see Dionigi 1988: 34–7. For the relevance of these Lucretian passages to Optatian, see Buisset 2006: 202–4, proposing a direct allusion in poem 25 (‘L’image, très parlante, des lettres constituant les

played out in multiple other Roman contexts – from Quintilian’s prescription that young children should play with ‘ivory forms of letters’ in order to learn their syllables (*Inst.* 1.1.26)<sup>45</sup> to the linguistic games of the so-called *tabulae lusoriae* (in which players joined up segregated verbal units to form a variety of Latin words).<sup>46</sup> Late-antique grammarians also took up the thinking. As Sergius puts it (most likely writing in the fifth century AD), individual letters are the essential elements of verbal communication: for ‘the letter alone cannot be split into any further division’ (*littera sola non habet quo soluatur*), we are told, and ‘it is for this reason that it is called “indivisible” by philosophers’ (*ideo a philosophis atomos dicitur*).<sup>47</sup> The overriding game of Optatian’s poem is premised upon a related view of language, whereby individual words can be broken down into their constituent components. But the poet also delights in the fact that his *elementa* can be put together to form new compound entities: the elements are building-blocks for manufactured creations that function visually and verbally at once; the picture that the poem yields, in short, exploits the *elementa* to generate further words, phrases and poetic hexameters in turn.

My fourth observation pertains to the poetic imagery in which the poet interlaces this act of manufacture: namely, as an art of *weaving*. At numerous points within the poem (*textit*, v.15; *intexta*, v.17; *intexere*, v.28; *textu*, v.35), we find Optatian crafting an analogy between the process of poetic and pictorial composition and that of manufacturing a textured fabric. As self-proclaimed *nexus* (vv.13, 25), the very form of this artefact is imagined in terms of something sewn or interlaced.<sup>48</sup> Of course, the figurative analogy between composing poetry and spinning a yarn had a long literary history among Greek and Latin authors alike.<sup>49</sup> Among Optatian’s contemporaries, it was also replayed in the genre of the *cento* – that is, of poems ‘stitched’ together from the fabric of the poetic past (above all, lines from Virgil).<sup>50</sup> For Optatian, this materialist metaphor seems to take on an additional significance, brilliantly figuring a unique sort of poetic-pictorial cross-stitch. It is in this context that we should understand the term that Optatian coins for the verses interlaced within the gridded poems: in the ninth poem, one such apparition is described as an *intextus... uersus* – an ‘interwoven verse’ embroidered into the tapestry of the text (9.v; cf. 21.16: *texti... uersus*). When, in our poem, Optatian tells how Calliope ‘scarcely weaves the songs in Phoebus’ painted measures’ (*mea uix pictis dum textit carmina Phoebi | Calliope modulis*, vv.15–16) – or how the page is ‘painted according to the lore of the Muses with varied weave of elements’ (*picta elementorum uario per musica textu*, v.35 – repeated in 3.vi) – the poet interlaces the literary metaphor over a

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mots convient à Lucrèce pour illustrer la théorie des atomes, et il est certain que les vers d’Optatien évoquaient ce passage pour son public’).

<sup>45</sup> On this passage and other related testimonia, cf. Baroin 2010: 79–80; Squire 2014b: 413–15.

<sup>46</sup> For the extant Roman ‘gaming tablets’, see the catalogue of Ferrua 2001 (with references to Ferrua’s earlier catalogues of 1946, 1948 and 1964); cf. Purcell 1995: 17–28 (citing earlier bibliography at 18, n. 69), Friedrich 2001: 81–100 and Habinek 2009: 125–7. The parallel with Optatian’s grid-poems is discussed in Körfer fthc.

<sup>47</sup> *GL* Keil 4.475; cf. Gualandri fthc.

<sup>48</sup> The punning language of ‘weaving’ (*texere*) a manufactured ‘fabric’ is a mainstay throughout the corpus: cf. 4.9 (*textu*); 6.2 (*textit*); 9.13 (*texens*); 9.v (*intextus uersus*); 16.5 (*alio textu*); 17.8 (*uerbum textum*); 19.19 (*texta*); 19.25 (*uisam contexere nauem*); 20b.4 (*texta*); 21.16 (*texti... uersus*). On the metapoetic language, see especially Bruhat 1999: 107–14 and Bruhat 2009: esp. 116–17, 124–5.

<sup>49</sup> On the metaphor and its metapoetic significance, see Scheid and Svenbro 1996, along now with Scheidegger Lämmle 2015 (with stimulating discussion of Optatian at 176–83).

<sup>50</sup> On the sixteen extant Latin centos and their history (stretching back to at least the second century AD, but reaching a climax in the fourth and early fifth), see e.g. Charlet 1997: 533–7; McGill 2005; Bažil 2009; Hernández Lobato 2012: 262–317; Pelttari 2014: esp. 96–112; Elsner fthc.

materialist rhetoric of artistic manufacture: part of the ‘variety’ of this production lies in its textile combinations of painted figure and textured word.

But – and this is my fifth point – our *textus* is not simply something ‘written’, ‘painted’ or indeed ‘woven’. As a script that must be animated by the voice of the reading respondent, this poem is presented as something to be performed.<sup>51</sup> If the poet declares himself to be a *uatis* (vv.5, 7, 23, 3.v), he likewise heralds his creation as *carmen* – not just a ‘poem’ on the page, but also a ‘song’ for oral recital (*carminis*, v.5; *carmina*, vv.15, 24; *carmen*, vv.28, 32; *carmine*, 3.i). Almost as soon as the first verse introduces the topos of the *uultus*, Optatian underscores the point, telling how the Muses are now *singing* of Constantine’s deeds (*gesta canunt*, v.4; cf. *canunt*, v.24, *canens*, v.33). So great are those feats, it seems, that they call for a vocal response in turn (*uoce*, v.23; cf. *ore*, v.6; *ore*, v.31), responding to the call of Constantine himself (*uocas*, v.8). Just as Constantine will ‘hear’ the resulting artefact (*audis*, v.10), so too will this creation itself sound (*uersu instigans ora sonare*, v.7; *sonare*, v.25): not only does the creation promise to ‘speak’ and ‘be proclaimed’ (*loqui*, 20; *fari*, v.27; *loqui*, 31), it responds to things already spoken (*dicta*, v.9), and likewise points to the potential of future speech (*dicturus*, v.14).

From this perspective, Optatian might be said to enact a lesson not just in ‘reading’ a Roman portrait, but also, as it were, in ‘singing’ of one: words, images and sounds are all interwoven within the multimedial tapestry. This performative aspect is echoed in the final line of the poem – a verse, as we have said, which is also laid out in ‘varied’ spatial form towards the bottom of the grid: *picta elementorum uario per musica textu* (v.35, 3.iv). Like so many others, the verse proves difficult to translate into English. In the translation above, I opted for ‘painted according to the lore of the Muses with varied weave of elements’. But the substantive adjective *musica* is rather more multifaceted. On one level, *musica* of course refers to things that pertain to the Muses. And yet, on another, the adjective can simultaneously refer to things that are ‘musical’, ‘tuneful’ and ‘melodious’. It is not just ‘pictorial’ elements that make up Optatian’s ‘varied weave’, in other words. Intrinsic to Optatian’s feat is also an idea of musical performance – inscribed within something ‘painted according to music with varied weave of elements’.<sup>52</sup>

This takes me to a sixth preliminary observation – and to a paradox. For despite all the talk of sound, this interweaving of poem and picture is predicated upon an audience *viewing* the artefact on the page (*pagina*, v.33) rather than hearing it spoken or sung. To put the point negatively, we might say that the very promise of performance – so emphatically championed throughout the text – threatens to disentangle the pictorial-poetic cross-stitch. The observation goes hand in hand with the repeated talk of ‘limitations’.<sup>53</sup> When in vv.28–29, Optatian declares it a ‘wondrous work of the mind to weave a song into verses in various directions’ (*mentis opus mirum metris intexere carmen | ad uarios cursus*), his image of cognitive freedom is set against the idea of boundaries, constraints and restrictions – of being

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<sup>51</sup> For a recent championing of the point, see Männlein-Robert fthc. (with stimulating discussion of poem 3). More generally on ancient literature’s concern with sonority and oral performance, see the provocative introduction of Butler 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Needless to say, this underlying idea of ‘music’ in the third poem chimes with numerous other poems within the corpus: not for nothing, for example, do two of Optatian picture-poems visualize a ‘water-organ’ and set of panpipes (poems 20 [Fig. 1], 27), so that the very form of the text substantiates the promise of musical performance.

<sup>53</sup> For the best discussion, see Bruhat 2009, discussing this poem at 115–17.

‘trapped in narrow confine’ (*arto in limite clausa*, v.29).<sup>54</sup> No less important are vv.13–14, addressing the subjunctive potential of a poem to ‘move’ (*mouet*) the Muses – albeit in the context of a poem, distinct from the poet’s present verses (*at mea... carmina*), which are poignantly not ‘in their metres freed from the law of the weave’ (*nexus lege solutis | ...metris*). Despite its loaded potentiality – for picture, as indeed for song – this is an artefact that emblazons the question of ‘limits’ first and foremost.

### III. Masquerade: reading between the lines?

It is at this point that I want to proceed from the text of our poem to the image of its woven apparition [Figs. 5–8]. For just what kind of *uultus* is shown here? How should we make sense of its form? And how might any interpretation of the picture align with a reading of the poetic text that figures it?

One way of reconstructing what earlier audiences might have seen in the picture is to examine the extant scholia.<sup>55</sup> After drawing out each of the *uersus intexti*, the scholiast tradition characterized the figurative scheme as a polygonal pattern: ‘on this page there are four hexagons with an equal number of letters, and eight orthogonal triangles, again with equal numbers of letters, which increase or decrease in turn by way of single letters’ (*in hac pagina quattuor hexagona sunt pari numero litterarum, et octo orthogona adaeque pari numero litterarum per singulas litteras crescentia uel decrescentia*). According to this geometric interpretation, the figure amounts to a series of linear forms: first, the scholiast divides the pattern into four eight-sided shapes (each occupying a symmetrical quarter of the page); second, he proceeds around the edges of the grid, noting a series of triangular patterns that vary from nine to ten letters along their two equilateral lengths.<sup>56</sup>

But how might such a shape be understood – by any stretch of the imagination – to figure the *uultus* of Constantine? The problem has vexed modern readers, and none more so than Giovanni Polara.<sup>57</sup> Over and above any other twentieth-century scholar, Polara has strived to rehabilitate Optatian’s scholarly standing. But Polara was stumped by the pictorial form of this particular example. According to his 1973 commentary, the pattern is said to have functioned as an elaborate *praeteritio*: it offers a poetic explanation as to why such a *uultus Augusti* would be impossible (hence the metapoetic reflections in not only the main text, but also the *uersus intexti*, with their reference to the ‘unbroken law of the metre and verse’, *metri et uersus lege manente*, 3.ii). Later, Polara ventured an alternative suggestion, supposing that the poem might have served as a preface to a different

<sup>54</sup> Rühl 2006: 96 nicely compares the first three *uersus intexti* of poem 5: *cum sic scripta placent, audent sibi deuia Musae | per uarios signare modos deuotaque mentis | gaudia, quae pingens loquitur mea, Phoebe, Camena*.

<sup>55</sup> On the scholia, see the important discussion of Pipitone 2012a, discussing this particular commentary at 35–9: Pipitone argues that the scholia on poem 3 – like those on poems 2, 5–8, 10, 12–16, 20–1 and 25 – belong to the earliest group; he likewise speculates that they might even date to the time of Constantine himself (Pipitone 2012a: 28–30, 91–3, a view endorsed by Wienand 2012a: 371 n. 44).

<sup>56</sup> Some triangles, we might note, are equilateral with nine letters on all three sides, while others are isosceles with 10 letters along two lengths and 19 letters along the unmarked space of the margin.

<sup>57</sup> Polara 1973: 2.39; Polara 1978: 345–8; Polara 2004: 68. Polara also compares scenarios in other poems (cf. e.g. Polara 1978: 346 n.60 on the promise of visualizing Iris at 21.8–10, with Polara 1973: 2.137, 138–9); cf. Gualandri 1977: 185; Bruhat 1999: 141–6; Pozzi 2002: 155–6 (noting later imitations); Rühl 2006: 82, 93–4; Bruhat 2009: 117; Pipitone 2012a: 37–9.

work. According to this later argument, Optatian wrote a poem that *did* succeed in visualizing the *uultus* of the emperor – but one very different from the text at hand, and long since lost.<sup>58</sup>

In my view, neither of these explanations is satisfactory. For whatever else we make of the poem, Optatian seems to paint a rather more complex picture. As we read the text and its *uersus intexti*, we find the poet reflecting knowingly on the (im)possibility of representing a portrait of the emperor. The very question of whether the image is a portrait, no less than what viewers/ readers should make of it, is – deliberately – left open.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the poem's opening lines (vv.1–3):

*Fingere Musarum flagrare numine uultus,  
alme parens orbis, perfecta in munia uersu  
uotaque, si ratio non abnuat ordine Phoebi.*

I would be burning to fashion your face in verse with the power of the Muses,  
kindly father of the world, in fulfilment of my duties and prayers, should my  
scheme not depart from the rule of Phoebus.

Optatian opens the poem with an elaborate conditional sentence. But, as Petra Schierl and Cédric Scheidegger Lämmle remind us, these verses combine different registers of conditional possibility.<sup>59</sup> The phrase expressing the condition ('protasis') is delayed, so as to appear in the third verse. But it differs in mood from the opening main clause ('apodosis'): while the sentence begins with an apodosis in the unreal present (*fingerere... flagrare* – marking an impossibility through its imperfect subjunctive), the protasis of v.3 is couched in a present subjunctive (*abnuat*), holding out a remote – but not excluded – possibility.<sup>60</sup>

A similar tension recurs in the *uersus intexti* that zigzag across the four sides of the grid. In these verses we find a conditional sentence that subtly reconfigures the opening lines of the poem, beginning in the verse that runs along the top of the page. Instead of the unreal present of the opening apodosis within the main poem (*fingerere Musarum flagrare numine uultus*), this first hexameter furnishes the phrase *fingerere Musa queat tali si carmine uultus...* ('Were the Muse able to fashion the face in such song...', 3.i). At least three transformations have taken place. First, there is a change in subject: we move from the speaking poet (addressing his audience in the first person: *fingerere... flagrare*) to a statement about the Muse (*fingerere Musa queat*). Second comes a shift in both tense and mood: not only does the verb *queat* thrust questions of ability to the fore, it does so in the potential (rather than unreal) realm of a present subjunctive. Third, the apodosis of the main text – dependent on the delayed subordinate clause of v.3 (*si ratio non abnuat ordine Phoebi*) – has been turned inside

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Polara 2004: 68: 'la mancata rispondenza fra l'immagine geometrica rappresentata dai *uersus intexti* e questo programma è evidente, e si potrà forse pensare che qui il poeta esponga un suo progetto da realizzare in altre composizioni, così come alle fine del c. VI (33–35) è preannunciato un carme raffigurante un trofeo, che può essere il c. VII. In questo caso, bisognerà concludere che il carme col volto dell' imperatore non fu poi composto, o non ci è pervenuto'. Compare also Rühl 2006: 82: 'Aufgrund der fehlenden technischen Möglichkeiten hat der rubrizierte Intext dann aber eben nicht die Form von Konstantins Konterfei, sondern nur die eines Musters, das Ähnlichkeit mit einem vierblättrigen Kleeblatt besitzt'.

<sup>59</sup> Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc.; cf. Polara 1973: 2.35, 39 (with further comments in Gualandri 1977: 185, comparing Virg. *Georg.* 4.116–19); Bruhat 1999: 142, n.268. I have not been able to consult Chmiel 1930: 31 (as cited by Polara 1978: 345–6, n. 57).

<sup>60</sup> As Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc. ask, 'liegt hier ein unsauberer Modus-Gebrauch vor, oder eine entscheidende Selbstkorrektur im Fortgang des Gedankens?'



out: the main clause of the ground-text has been reconfigured as a subordinate protasis. It is only when we look to the verse running along the right-hand side of the grid that we find the corresponding main clause of the conditional sentence: *uincere Apelleas audebit pagina ceras* (3.iv). Where the main poem had tendered an unreal suggestion in the imperfect subjunctive (*flagrarem*, v.1), the mood of this apodosis has shifted (*audebit*, 3.iv): the declaration that ‘the page will dare outdo Apellean waxes’ is now made to signal a very real prospect in the future indicative.<sup>61</sup>

That Optatian leaves these different registers of possibility unresolved is confirmed by the two verses that criss-cross the centre of the grid (3.v–vi):

*grandia quaerentur, si uatis laeta Camena  
orsa iuuat, uersu consignans aurea saecula.*  
Great things will be sought, should the joyful Muse favour her bard’s  
endeavours, sealing the golden age in verse.

With these hexameters, the poet inscribes a conditional sentence right at the literal and metaphorical crux of the poem; indeed the protasis and apodosis are themselves split across the criss-crossing verses, so that both occupy the horizontal and vertical axes alike. But these lines hardly settle the conditional ambiguities. On the one hand, the subordinate protasis is staked upon a less real future in the present subjunctive (*iuuat*). On the other, the apodosis is once again couched in a realizable passive future indicative (*quaerentur*). These central lines ‘seal’ the poem with a possibility that rests uneasily between different moods and tenses. And as with the other conditional phrases, the syntax turns out to be highly tactical, leaving readers to puzzle over the possible or impossible hypotheticals introduced: with each protasis and apodosis, we shift back and forth between a wholly unreal present prospect (imperfect subjunctive: *flagrarem*), a possibility in the less real future (present subjunctive: *abnuat*, *queat*, *iuuat*) and a more realizable future potential (future indicative: *audebit*, *quaerentur*).

Such syntactical ambiguities go hand in hand, I think, with the phrase that describes the project of ‘fashioning’ a portrait of Constantine: *fingere... uultus* (3.1, 3.i). The choice of both noun and verb strikes me as significant. In Latin, the word *uultus* does not quite equate to ‘face’. It refers instead to a ‘look’ or ‘countenance’ (which Optatian here renders in an accusative plural) – that is, to a mode of facial animation and expression.<sup>62</sup> Numerous Latin authors help pinpoint the semantic range, above all by associating the *uultus* with a person’s *mores* (‘character’). According to Cicero, who discusses the *uultus* as something moulded by the mind (*uultus, cum mentis, a qua is fingitur...: Tusc. 3.31*), the ‘countenance’ could be called both the *imago animi* (‘mirror of the emotions’: *de Or. 3.221*; cf. *Or. 60*) and *sermo tacitus mentis* (‘silent speech of the mind’: *Pis. 1.1*).<sup>63</sup> Noting that the Greeks have no

<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the talk of ‘daring’ (*audebit*) echoes the main text’s prospect of ‘boldly speaking through untrodden paths’ (*audenterque loqui... per deuia*, v.20). One might likewise note here, following Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc., that the future indicative of the *uersus intexti* is mirrored in the syntax of the main poem’s final lines, with its talk of vows that the ‘painted... page will fulfill’ (*pagina... complebit... picta*, 3.33–35).

<sup>62</sup> See OLD s.v. ‘*uultus*’. For further discussion, see Hallett 2005: 281–95, esp. 282–5; cf. e.g. Pékary 1985: 101–3; Giuliani 1986: 222–38 (esp. 327 n.33, comparing Q. Cic. *Comm. pet.* 44 – where the *uultus ac frons* is referred to as the *animi ianua*); Corbeill 2004: 147–50; Meister 2012: 53–7, esp. 54; Squire 2014a: 66–9.

<sup>63</sup> Corbeill 2004: 150 compares Quint. 11.3.72: in this passage, Quintilian explains how, in a rhetorical performance, the facial countenance ‘dominates most of all’, since ‘through it we obtain the best understanding’ so that often ‘it takes the place of all words’ (*dominatur autem maxime uultus... hoc plurima intellegimus, hic est saepe pro omnibus uerbis*).

corresponding word, Cicero likewise observes that ‘what we call the *uultus*, which can be found in no living creature save man, is a mark of *mores* (*is, qui appellatur uultus, qui nullo in animante esse praeter hominem potest, indicat mores*: *de Leg.* 1.27).<sup>64</sup> If the *uultus* gives outward form to something so ‘internal’ and ‘invisible’ as the rational soul (*animus*), abstract things could also have a *uultus* attributed to them – among them ‘law’ (e.g. *Cic. Tusc.* 3.31), rhetorical ‘eloquence’ (e.g. *Tac. Dial.* 18.3) and ‘oratory’ (e.g. *Quint.* 9.1.21).<sup>65</sup>

The multiple connotations of the word *uultus* – referring to something that can be both concrete and abstract – should be understood in connection with the infinitive verb *ingere*.<sup>66</sup> The primary meaning of this verb is of course to ‘mould’ or ‘shape’ – especially in the context of plastic media (thereby adding a third ‘sculptural’ dimension to Optatian’s talk of ‘painting’).<sup>67</sup> Yet this image of physical ‘fashioning’ could also be applied to works of literary ‘fiction’: *ingere* could refer metaphorically to the act not just of ‘coining’ words, but also of ‘composing’ poems. No less importantly, the word can suggest a *mental* picture – that is, of conjuring up an image in the mind’s eye of the subject (translating the Greek word *πλάττειν*).<sup>68</sup> With the phrase *ingere uultus*, then, Optatian loads his poem with a range of ideas, suggesting at once a physical, literary and conceptual mode of forging Constantine’s *uultus*. Depending upon how seriously we take the variations in the conditional clauses, we might detect an additional semantic resonance too: taken together, the Latin phrase *ingere uultus* could refer to acts of ‘modifying’ or ‘transforming’ facial expression – that is, of ‘disguising’, ‘hiding’ or indeed ‘masquerading’ one’s true character.<sup>69</sup>

Our artefact might be thought the ultimate in ‘masquerade’: as we have observed, it raises the prospect of visualizing a *uultus*, while remaining noncommittal about whether that prospect has been/ is being/ will be (or for that matter *could* be) fulfilled. Optatian leaves such questions poignantly unanswered. Yet in playing with the very possibility of rendering a *uultus* in verse, he also situates his conceit against a particular literary critical backdrop. For whatever we make of the actual pattern of his verses, Optatian draws upon a long-standing literary topos about the respective ability of words and pictures to fashion a ‘true’ portrait of their subject.

One important intertext – as first noted by Marie-Odile Bruhat – comes in an epigram by Martial, addressed to Caecilius Secundus. Within a poem expressly devoted to the comparative resources of painting and language, above all their

<sup>64</sup> On the passage, see especially Corbeill 1996: 30–5, along with Kenter 1972: 115 and the further parallels listed by Dyck 2004: 140–1 *ad loc.*

<sup>65</sup> For *uultus* as ‘an aspect, appearance (of abstr. things)’ see *OLD* s.v. ‘*uultus*’ 6.

<sup>66</sup> As Optatian must have known full well, there were good reasons for eschewing any such physical likeness of the emperor’s face: the creation and dissemination of imperial portraiture was carefully controlled, and by the fourth-century laws were in place to prevent the propagation of such ‘unofficial’ representations (cf. Bruhat 1999: 142).

<sup>67</sup> That three-dimensional aspect is perhaps further nuanced by the reference to ‘Apellean waxes’ (*Apelleas... ceras*, 3.vi): the allusion is of course to encaustic painting, but Optatian goes out of his way to emphasize material facture.

<sup>68</sup> See *OLD* s.v. ‘*ingo*’ (with 6a for the meaning ‘to compose (poems and other literary works)’ – as attested by e.g. *Cic. de Leg.* 1.27, [*Cic.*] *Ad Her.* 1.13 and *Hor. Ars P.* 119, 151, 338); on the additional meaning ‘to form or convey a mental picture, conjure up in the mind, visualize’ (*OLD* s.v. ‘*ingo*’ 8a) and the relationship with *πλάττειν*, cf. below, pp. XX–XX.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. e.g. *Caes. BG* 1.39.4: *uultum ingere*; *Cic. De Off.* 2.43: *quodsi qui simulatione et inani ostentatione et ficto non modo sermone, sed etiam uultu stabilem se gloriam consequi posse rentur, uehementer errant*; *Clu.* 72: *fictos simulatosque uultus*; *Ov. Met.* 4.319: *finxit uultum*. On the literary topos of the counterfeit *uultus* in Tacitus’ *Annals*, see O’Gorman 2000: 78–105; see also the wide-ranging analyses of Corbeill 2004: esp. 140–67 and Meister 2012: 249–55.

capacity to fashion a *uultus*, Martial had staged a comparison between a purported ‘painted tablet’ (*picta tabella*) and poetry (7.84).<sup>70</sup>

*Dum mea Caecilio formatur imago Secundo  
spirat et arguta picta tabella manu,  
i, liber, ad Geticam Peucen Histrumque iacentem:  
haec loca perdomitis gentibus ille tenet.  
Parua dabis caro, sed dulcia, dona sodali: (5)  
certior in nostro carmine uultus erit;  
casibus hic nullis, nullis delebilis annis  
uiuet, Apelleum cum morietur opus.*

While my portrait is being made for Caecilius Secundus, and while the picture, painted by a skillful hand, seems to breathe, go, my book, to the Getic Peuce and the submissive Danube; this is his post, among the conquered people. You will give a little gift to my dear friend, but a sweet one: my countenance will be surer in my verse. This [*uultus* of verse] will live, indestructible by accidents or lapse of years, while the work of Apelles shall die.

This self-declared *carmen* provides a striking precedent for our poem. Just as Martial adduces *Apelleum opus* as counterpart to poetry, Optatian develops the same analogy, relating his *carmine uultus* (3.i) to ‘Apelleian waxes’ (*Apelleas ceras*, 3.iv); indeed, Optatian even uses the same adjectival form found in the earlier epigram.<sup>71</sup> If Optatian alludes to Martial’s poem, he nonetheless goes beyond its critical framework. While Martial ultimately stages a distinction between poem and picture, Optatian tenders the promise of uniting the two: the *uultus* is rendered within the *carmen*, and the *carmen* is constructed out of the *uultus*. Such knowing recourse to literary precedent also has significance in its own right: both the themes and language of Optatian’s poem are comprised from the *spolia* of the literary past – paralleling, among other things, the sorts of spoliation found in Constantinian art (and nowhere more programmatically than on Constantine’s eponymous triumphal arch at Rome).<sup>72</sup>

But Martial forms just part of the literary critical picture. For both Optatian and Martial alike play upon a still longer topos of poetically responding to portraiture. In this connection, it is worth recalling what we have said about the poem’s multiple references to its sonorous qualities, not least through its repeated references to ‘speaking’, ‘declaring’ and ‘singing’. Within the generic frameworks of Greek and Latin epigram, especially epigrams on painted or sculpted portraits, this element of

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Bruhat 1999: 145–6. On the poem, see the commentary of Galán Vioque 2002: 455–8 (supposing that the portrait ‘is probably referring to a picture intended to go at the beginning of an edition of his work’, 455). For an introduction to the long-running literary contest between poetry or statuary as the more efficient monumental memorial, see Benediktson 2000: esp. 12–40, and above all Steiner 2001: 251–94 (esp. 279–81 on Isoc. *Evag.* 2.73–5).

<sup>71</sup> For other examples of the adjective *Apelleus*, see – in addition to Mart. 11.9.2 – e.g. Prop. 1.2.22 (*Apelleis... tabulis*); Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.100 (*Apelleae... cerae*); 2.2.64 (*Apellei... colores*); 5.1.4–6 (*Apelleo... colore*). Of these, the other most important parallel is Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.100 (= *DNO* 4.192–3, no. 2946): in his poem on the equestrian statue of the Emperor Domitian, not only does Statius anticipate Optatian’s phrasing (*Apelleas... ceras*), but he does so in the context of an analogy between ‘painting’ and ‘writing’: *Apelleae cuperent te scribere cerae* (*Silv.* 1.100; cf. Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc.).

<sup>72</sup> For some of the intertexts, see the presentation of the poem in Polara 1973: 1.15–16. On Constantine and the aesthetics of spoliation on his eponymous arch, see Elsner 2000 (noting the parallel with Optatian at 175); cf. Varner 2014 on Constantine’s re-use of earlier imperial portraits (discussing the arch at 64–70).

‘speech’ was a mainstay for contemplating the respective workings of poetic and pictorial composition. It was Simonides, in the early fifth century BC, who famously declared painting to be ‘silent poetry’ and poetry poem to be ‘speaking painting’.<sup>73</sup> By the Hellenistic period, we find Greek epigrammatists contemplating portraits in closely related terms.<sup>74</sup> Among the most celebrated examples is an epigram on a painting of Agatharis preserved in the *Greek Anthology*, and attributed to Erinna (*Anth. Pal.* 6.352 = Erinna 3 GP):<sup>75</sup>

ἐξ ἀταλᾶν χειρῶν τάδε γράμματα· λῶστέ Προμαθεῦ,  
ἐντι καὶ ἄνθρωποι τὴν ὁμαλοὶ σοφίαν.

ταύταν γοῦν ἐτύμως, τὴν παρθένον ὅστις ἔγραψεν,  
αἱ καὶ οὐδὲν ποτέθηκ’, ἥς κ’ Ἀγαθαρχὶς ὅλα.

This painting/writing [*grammata*] is the work of delicate hands. Most excellent Prometheus, there are humans as clever as you! At least if the person who so accurately depicted/wrote [*egrapsen*] this girl had only also added a voice, you would be Agatharchis complete.

While punning on the dual meanings of the Greek words *graphein* and *gramma*, and thereby drawing out an analogy between written words and painted imagery, Erinna’s poem supplies the voice that painting, *qua* painting, lacks. There can be no doubt that Optatian was aware of this critical tradition. What is so special about his creation, however, is once again its *fusion* of words and images: where Cicero had labelled the *uultus* the ‘silent speech of the mind’, the text of his *uultus* promises to talk, sound and sing. Indeed, one of the ways in which the resulting page might be said ‘dare to outdo the waxes of Apelles’ (*uincere Apelleas audebit pagina ceras*, 3.vi) lies precisely in its promise of bestowing voice on the picture.

**INSERT FIGS.10–11 HERE: On same double-page spread (ideally first on verso (half-column), second on recto (full column))**

We will return a little later to literary responses to portraits. Before proceeding, however, it is worth pausing to say a little more about the reference to ‘Apelles’ specifically. In my view, the very allusion to Apelles here supplies an additional prompt to see the poem’s *uultus* as more than mere literary fiction. By the time Optatian was writing, ‘Apellean’ was of course a byword for painterly virtuosity: the work of this fourth-century BC painter was synonymous with the very best in Classical Greek painting.<sup>76</sup> But it is perhaps significant that Apelles was also legendary for his portraits of a particular patron: according to long ancient tradition, Alexander the Great entrusted Apelles with painting his portraits, just as he gave

<sup>73</sup> See Plut. *Mor.* [*De Glor. Ath.*] 346f = Simonides frg. 190b Bergk: ‘Simonides says that a picture is a silent poem, and a poem a speaking picture’ (ὁ Σιμωνίδης τὴν μὲν ζωγραφίαν ποιήσιν σιωπῶσαν προσαγορεύει, τὴν δὲ ποιήσιν ζωγραφίαν λαλοῦσαν). For discussions, see e.g. Carson 1992; Sprigath 2004; Männlein-Robert 2007a: 20–22; Squire 2013a: 161 (on the debts to the Homeric ‘shield of Achilles’ description at *Il.* 18.478–608). On the related Horatian maxim of *ut pictura poesis* (*Ars P.* 361), see especially Hardie 1993, along with the wide-ranging treatment of the posthumous reception in Barkan 2013.

<sup>74</sup> For some introductions, see – now amid a burgeoning bibliography – Gutzwiller 2002; Meyer 2005; Petrovic 2005; Männlein-Robert 2007a; Männlein-Robert 2007b; Tueller 2008: esp. 141–54; Squire 2010a; Squire 2010b: esp. 82–8; Christian 2015: esp. 28–107. On the late-antique reception of these ideas, Boeder 1996 remains fundamental.

<sup>75</sup> For recent discussions of the poem, see Skinner 2001: 206–9; Gutzwiller 2002: 88–91; Meyer 2007: 197–8; Männlein-Robert 2007a: 38–43; Tueller 2008: 142–3.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. *DNO* 4.185–93, nos. 2936–49. In connection with our poem, one might also note the Plinian reference to Apelles as someone who ‘also painted things that cannot be painted’ (*pinxit et quae pingi non possunt*, *HN* 35.96).

Lysippus and Pyrgoteles a monopoly in representing him in statuary and glyptic gems.<sup>77</sup> Within a poem expressly dedicated to the theme of depicting Constantine, the reference to the preferred portraitist of Alexander seems particularly pointed. As Marie-Odile Bruhat has noted, Apellean images of Alexander were a live topic among earlier Roman imperial writers, who exploited them to debate the nature of the emperor's imperial image (no less than modes of literary patronage).<sup>78</sup> Still more important is the fact that, in fashioning his own self-image, Constantine seems to have knowingly nodded to Alexandrian iconographic models.<sup>79</sup> Quite apart from the emperor's studied recourse (from AD 313 onwards) to a young imperial image – apparently alluding to Julio-Claudian models (above all Augustus), as well as to that of Trajan<sup>80</sup> – there are various iconographic references on Constantinian coins. From AD 324 onwards, we find not only the motif of an upward gaze (emulating and adapting a type developed by Alexander),<sup>81</sup> but also the addition of a kingly diadem, often studded with jewels and diamonds [Fig. 10]: once again, the motif imitates a stylistic feature common on the coinage of Alexander and his immediate successors [cf. e.g. Fig. 11].<sup>82</sup> When approached from the perspective of Constantine's own self-image in the 320s, the promise of outdoing 'Apellean waxes' takes on a political hue: it relates the imperial *uultus* of the poem to iconographic models that were being intensely revisited during the period.

There seems to be at least one other possible resonance to this reference to Apelles. If the allusion brings to mind the Alexandrian debts of Constantine's imperial self-image, it might also spark more metapoetic reflections. Particularly relevant is the well-known anecdote recorded by Pliny the Elder about a makeshift competition between Apelles and Protogenes. Here is the story in full (*HN* 35.81–3).<sup>83</sup>

*scitum inter Protogenen et eum quod accidit. ille Rhodi uiuebat, quo cum Apelles adnauigasset, auidus cognoscendi opera eius fama tantum sibi cogniti, continuo officinam petiit. aberat ipse, sed tabulam amplae magnitudinis in machina aptatam una custodiebat anus. haec foris esse Protogenen respondit interrogauitque, a quo quaesitum diceret. ab hoc, inquit Apelles arreptoque penicillo lineam ex colore duxit summae tenuitatis per tabulam. et reuerso Protogeni quae gesta erant anus indicauit. ferunt artificem protinus*

<sup>77</sup> For the numerous anecdotes, see *DNO* 4.128–31, nos. 2582–9, along with e.g. *DNO* 4.167–73, nos. 2910–18.

<sup>78</sup> Bruhat 1999: 144–5 (discussing Hor. *Epod.* 2.1.264–70): 'En prétendant surpasser Apelle, Optatien indique... qu'il se range parmi les artistes les plus dignes de représenter l'empereur et que, grâce à son procédé poétique à double facette, il compte bien le faire à la fois comme peintre et comme poète' (145); cf. Bruhat 2009: 119; Schierl and Scheidegger Lämmle fthc., comparing Cic. *Ad fam.* 5.12.7.

<sup>79</sup> The most important introduction to Constantinian portraiture remains L'Orange, Unger and Wegner 1984: 37–80. Other overviews include Bruun 1966: esp. 24–46; Harrison 1967; Wright 1987: esp. 505–6; Alföldi 1999: 172–89; Hannestad 2001; Elsner 2006: 260–4; Walter 2006: esp. 14; Hannestad 2007; Bardill 2012: esp. 11–27; compare also Rowland Smith 2007: esp. 177–8, 223–5 (on fourth-century imperial attitudes towards Alexander). On the history of Alexander's own image, R.R.R. Smith 1988 and A. Stewart 1993 provide standard introductions.

<sup>80</sup> For the change in iconography as 'the most extraordinary transformation of an emperor in the history of Roman portraiture', see Kleiner 1992: 433–42 (quotation from 434); cf. Hannestad 2001: esp. 95–8.

<sup>81</sup> On the upward gaze, look down to pp. XX–XX.

<sup>82</sup> See Bardill 2012: 11–19 (with further bibliography on the use of the diadem at 25 n. 24); cf. also Hannestad 2001: 95–6, 100–1, and Wienand 2012a: 393–5 (with additional references). On Fig. 10 (= London, British Museum, inv. CM R.244), see Bruun 1966: 451, Siscia, no. 206.

<sup>83</sup> = *DNO* 4.139–41, no. 2870. Compare also Plin. *HN* 35.84 (= *DNO* 4.185, no. 2936), on how Apelles never let a day go by without drawing a line – '...which has come through him to be proverbial' (*ut non lineam exerceret artem, quod ab eo in prouerbium uenit*).

*contemplatum subtilitatem dixisse Apellen uenisse, non cadere in alium tam absolutum opus; ipsumque alio colore tenuiorem lineam in ipsa illa duxisse abeuntemque praecepisse, si redisset ille, ostenderet adiceretque hunc esse quem quaereret. atque ita euenit. reuertit enim Apelles et uinci erubescens tertio colore lineas secuit nullum relinquens amplius subtilitati locum. at Protogenes uictum se confessus in portum deuolauit hospitem quaerens, placuitque sic eam tabulam posteris tradi omnium quidem, sed artificum praecipuo miraculo. consumptam eam priore incendio Caesaris domus in Palatio audio, spectatam nobis ante, spatiosae nihil aliud continentem quam lineas uisum effugientes, inter egregia multorum opera inani similem et eo ipso allicientem omnique opere nobiliorem.*

A clever incident took place between Protogenes and him [i.e. Apelles]. Protogenes lived at Rhodes, and Apelles sailed there from a desire to make himself acquainted with Protogenes's works, which he knew only by reputation. He went at once to his studio. The artist was not in, but there was a panel of considerable size ready on the easel for painting, which was in the charge of a single old woman. When he asked, she told him that Protogenes was not at home, and asked who it was she should say wanted him. 'Say it was this person,' said Apelles, and taking up a brush he painted in colour across the panel an extremely fine line. When Protogenes returned the old woman showed him what had taken place. The story goes that the artist, after looking closely at the subtlety, said that it was Apelles who had come: so perfect a piece of work tallied with nobody else; and he himself, using another colour, drew a still finer line exactly on the top of the first one, and leaving the room told her to show it to him if he returned, and to add that this was the man he was looking for. And so it turned out: for Apelles came back and, ashamed to be defeated, cut the lines with another in a third colour, leaving no room for any further display of minute work. Hereupon Protogenes admitted he was defeated, and flew down to the harbour to look for the visitor; and it was decided that the panel should be handed down to posterity as it was, to be admired as a marvel by everybody, but particularly by artists. I am informed that it was burnt in the first fire which occurred in Caesar's palace on the Palatine; it had previously been admired by us, containing nothing on its vast surface other than the almost invisible lines, so that among the outstanding work of many artists it looked like an empty space, and by that very fact attracted attention and was more esteemed than any masterpiece.

According to Pliny, this encounter confirms the special place of the artist within the history of Greek painting: Apelles is said to have surpassed all painters before and after him (*omnes prius genitos futurosque postea superauit Apelles: HN 35.79*). Yet what interests me about the anecdote is the suggestive terminology in which the 'lines' of Apelles and Protogenes are described. With these virtuoso strokes, the Hellenistic poetics of *leptotês* or 'finesse', translated into the associated Latin terminology of *tenuitas* and *subtilitas*, finds a pictorial counterpart. In a series of diminishing strokes on a 'tablet of great size' (*tabulam amplae magnitudinis*), Apelles' initial line of great finesse (*lineam summae tenuitatis*) spurs an 'even thinner' (*tenuiorem*) pictorial response from Protogenes; that second mark is in turn outdone by the third and final line of Apelles – a line which 'leaves no room for further subtlety' (*nullum relinquens amplius subtilitati locum*).<sup>84</sup> What we find here,

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Squire 2011: 271–4 and Squire 2015a: 183–5; for other discussions, see e.g. van de Waal 1967; Gage 1981; Elkins 1995.

in short, is Pliny discussing the aesthetics of painting in the language of Hellenistic literary criticism.

Pliny's anecdote perhaps provides an additional lens for approaching Optatian's painterly creation. For those so minded, the artefact might be seen as transforming the painterly *miraculum* of Apelles and Protogenes – as described in the language of poetic *subtilitas* – back into literal poetic-pictorial 'wonder' (*mirum*, v.28). What we find is a line-painting that constructs its subtle strokes from the very fabric of poetic verse: on the one hand, the multicoloured lines of the page echo the polychrome creation of Apelles and Protogenes (*ex colore... alio colore... tertio colore*); on the other, this feat is predicated on the idea of a series of divisible lines – something that the virtuoso artist can 'cut' (*secuit*). Where Apelles and Protogenes only managed three lines between them, 'leaving no space for further subtlety', Optatian outdoes both artistic predecessors at once: thanks to his poetic-pictorial ingenuity, he is able to divide the lines of his verses multiple times – and in a plurality of different directions. In that sense, at least, this is a poetic artwork that outstrips the most celebrated of Classical painters – a display of artistry that dares to trump the virtuosity even of the great Apelles himself.

#### IV. A Christian interface? The 'saving sign' of the *uultus*

The story of the line-painting by Apelles and Protogenes returns us to the challenge of making sense of Optatian's picture as a *uultus Augusti*. Just as the legendary *tabula* of Apelles is described as looking like something empty (*inani simile*) – that is, as something devoid of significance, and even of artistic facture – so too the promise of depicting Constantine's portrait might seem metaphorically vacant. Despite its carefully delineated verses, the 'invisibility' of this artefact might be thought to outdo the scarcely perceptible traces of Apelles, recalling that panel which 'contained nothing on its vast surface other than the almost invisible lines' (*spatiose nihil aliud continentem quam lineas uisum effugientes*).

Anecdotes about Apelles provide only part of the poem's literary framework. If Optatian's intermedial feat resonates with ancient traditions of artistic criticism, the talk of fashioning a verbal *uultus* also develops a literary figure. As we have already noted, there were numerous precedents for the idea of forging a poetic portrait – parallels which lead us to Hellenistic Greek epigram, as well as to the purported *imago* of Martial. But by the time Optatian was writing, the trope of 'painting' a portrait in words had seeped into all manner of non-poetic literary genres. Particularly important here is the comparison between the portraitist and the biographer. Consider the following passage from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, penned in the late first century AD (*Alex.* 1.3):

ὥσπερ οὖν οἱ ζωγράφοι τὰς ὁμοιότητας ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὄψιν εἰδῶν, οἷς ἐμφαίνεται τὸ ἦθος, ἀναλαμβάνουσιν, ἐλάχιστα τῶν λοιπῶν μερῶν φροντίζοντες, οὕτως ἡμῖν δοτέον εἰς τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα μᾶλλον ἐνδύεσθαι καὶ διὰ τούτων εἰδοποιεῖν τὸν ἐκάστου βίον, ἐάσαντας ἐτέροις τὰ μεγέθη καὶ τοὺς ἀγῶνας.

Just as painters acquire the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, in which the person's character shows itself, yet make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.

Here, at the outset of his biography of Alexander, Plutarch draws an analogy between the verbal art of fashioning a biographical narrative and the painterly art of forging a subject's 'likenesses' (ὁμοιότηας): just as a portraitist must take his lead from the face and expression of eyes (ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὄψιν εἰδῶν), so the biographer must focus on the 'signs of the soul' (τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα). Subsequent writers would develop the analogy, not least in the context of imperial biographical 'portraits'. Given the Constantinian subject, one particularly informative parallel comes in the opening of the *Life of Constantine* written by Eusebius (probably in the late 330s). At the beginning of his biography, Eusebius explains that, for all the difficulties of treating so great a subject, it is 'nonetheless necessary to model oneself on the human painter, and dedicate an image of words in memory of the God-beloved' (ὁμῶς ἀναγκαῖον μιμήσει τῆς θνητῆς σκιαγραφίας τὴν διὰ λόγων εἰκόνα τῇ τοῦ θεοφιλοῦς ἀναθεῖναι μνήμη, *Vit. Const.* 1.10.1).<sup>85</sup> In interrogating the possibility of fashioning a facial countenance through language, our poem certainly develops a long-standing metaphor of verbal description as visual representation. Crucially, though, Optatian literalizes Eusebius' notion of fashioning a Constantinian image through words (τὴν διὰ λόγων εἰκόνα): he exploits the iconic potential of writing to bring a material *eikōn* before the eyes.

Much more might be said about this literary critical backdrop. On the one hand, the underlying idea of 'seeing' a verbally evoked subject might lead us to contemporary rhetorical ideas about ecphrasis (in turn literalized through Optatian's poem): the imperial Greek *Progymnasmata* of Theon, Hermogenes, Nikolaus and Apollonius all introduce ecphrasis in terms of 'a descriptive passage which brings the subject that is shown before one's eyes with visual vividness' (ἔκφρασις ἐστὶ λόγος περιηγηματικὸς ἐναργῶς ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγων τὸ δηλούμενον);<sup>86</sup> still more importantly, all four authors introduce the evocation of *prosōpa* – that is, the description of both literal 'faces' and more figurative 'persons' – as a particularly germane subject for ecphrastic description.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, this poem takes its place against a series of closely related Second Sophistic 'graphic' attempts to summon up portrait-pictures through words.<sup>88</sup> Among numerous other examples, one might think of the *Eikones* of Lucian, a dramatic skit staged between Lycinus and Polystratus, revolving around an attempt to evoke an image of a described female subject.<sup>89</sup> Just as Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* distinguished between the material resources of painting and the immaterial 'signs of the soul' (τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα), the protagonists of this dialogue discuss the possibility of sketching an 'image' through language (τὸ εἶδος... τῷ λόγῳ, *Imag.* 3). While Lycinus complains that not even the likes of Apelles, Zeuxis or Parrhasius could paint so magnificent a model (nor indeed Pheidias or Alcmenes sculpt her), the various artistic comparanda that follow end up championing the power

<sup>85</sup> On Eusebius' apparent debt to Plutarch's imagery, see Cameron and Hall 1999: 190, along with 191–2 on Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.11.1.

<sup>86</sup> Theon, *Prog.* 118.7 (= Patillon and Bolognesi 1997: 66). On the closely related definitions of other *Progymnasmata*, see Webb 2009: 51–5, along with the appendix of passages at 197–211. Webb 2009 provides the most important recent discussion of rhetorical ideas about ecphrasis; on the debts to longer tradition of literary composition and criticism, however, see the overview of Squire 2009: 139–46 and Squire 2015c (with references to the extensive literature).

<sup>87</sup> On definitions of the subjects of ecphrasis in the *Progymnasmata*, see Webb 2009: 61–86, 213–14.

<sup>88</sup> On *graphein* wordplay in ancient Greek, referring at once to the acts of 'drawing' and 'writing' alike, see e.g. Lissarrague 1992; Squire 2011: 235–43; Squire and Grethlein 2014: esp. 316–19.

<sup>89</sup> On the dialogue (and the subsequent 'sequel' in which Lucian has his characters offer a defence of it), see especially Maffei 1986; Romm 1990: 87–90; Goldhill 2001: 184–93; Steiner 2001: 295–306; Elsner 2004: 159–61; Vout 2007: 213–39; Cistaro 2009.



of literary ecphrasis over material portraiture. As Polystratus concludes, promising to render the dialogue into book-form (εἰς βιβλίον καταθέμενοι), the spoken exchange results in something ‘more enduring than the works of Apelles and Parrhasius and Polygnotus’ (μονιμωτέρα ... τῶν Ἀπελλοῦ καὶ Παρρασίου καὶ Πολυγνώτου): for ‘it would not be made of wood and wax and colours,’ Polystratus explains, ‘but is portrayed with inspirations from the Muses, and this will be found the most accurate kind of image, since it simultaneously discloses beauty of body and nobility of soul’ (ὅσῳ μὴ ξύλου καὶ κηροῦ καὶ χρωμάτων πεποιήται, ἀλλὰ ταῖς παρὰ Μουσῶν ἐπιπνοίαις εἴκασται, ἥπερ ἀκριβεστάτη εἰκὼν γένοιτ’ ἂν σώματος κάλλος καὶ ψυχῆς ἀρετὴν ἅμα ἐμφανίζουσα, *Imag.* 23).

Comparanda like these certainly help in sketching the rhetorical setting for our poem. They are less enlightening, though, when it comes to the graphic form of the *uersus intexti*. For just what sort of *uultus Augusti* is revealed in Optatian’s geometric figure, and how is so abstract a pattern to be visually understood?

It is worth stating unequivocally that Optatian does not provide any single answer to such questions. As we have noted, the poem wavers uneasily between different hypothetical registers: the conditional clauses slip and slide between a real and unreal possibility of depicting Constantine’s face; likewise, the very notion in Latin of ‘fashioning a countenance’ (*fingerere... uultus*) can encompass a series of figurative meanings – whether physical and real or figurative and abstract. Although some scholars have tried to solve the enigma by viewing the pattern in terms of some mimetic referent – a butterfly, four-leaf clover, eagle or military standard, for example<sup>90</sup> – I do not think that Optatian need be taken at his word. Indeed, the very talk of *signa*, as heralded in the poet’s metaphor of ‘sealing in verse’ (*uersu consignans*, 3.18, 3.vi), suggests that we are dealing with a more sophisticated sort of lettered ‘portrait’: Optatian, I think, constructs an interpretive framework that can encompass metaphorical, symbolic and allegorical registers of significance alongside the literal.

With those caveats in view, I want to propose that there might be more to this pattern than first meets the eye. Although Optatian eschews any single mode of interpreting the picture – indeed, allows his readers to view its design in relation to an elaborate poetic *praeteritio* – one way of making sense of this shape is as two interlaced cross-formations: the first cross is constructed from the axial intersection at the centre of the poem (two single lines meeting at the letter ‘S’ in the eighteenth row and column); the second is derived from a more elaborate 16-sided shape, rotated at a 45-degree angle from the first. The arrangement strikes me as potentially important.<sup>91</sup> For those minded to approach it in this way, the poem furnishes the potential to read the artefact not just as an imperial panegyric, but also as a veiled religious reference: it turns the *uultus Augusti* into something pregnant with potential Christian symbolism. In her 1999 doctoral dissertation, Marie-Odile Bruhat briefly touched upon such an interpretation, arguing that the ‘double image de la croix pourrait bien être la clé de la figure’ (albeit sagely adding that such interpretation ‘est difficile de

<sup>90</sup> For the *farfalle* suggestion, see Pipitone 2012a: 37; for the fourleaf clover (‘vierblättriges Kleeblatt’), Rühl 2006: 82. Männlein-Robert *ftnc.* examines both ideas, and tentatively also suggests an ‘Adler’ or ‘Vogel Phönix’.

<sup>91</sup> Although we do not know how Optatian originally marked out the *uersus intexti* of our poem, it is at least possible that the intersecting central lines were laid out in a different colour from the others (thereby emphasizing their distinct cruciform shape). Extant manuscript presentations sometimes use multiple colours within the same poem [cf. Fig. 12]. In the case of the third poem, moreover, such a presentation would also make interpretive sense: semantically, the two verses running along the central horizontal and vertical axis of the grid stand apart from the four verses that skirt around its outer frame.

l'affirmer').<sup>92</sup> In what follows, I set out to develop some of Bruhat's arguments: just as the poem flits between verbal and visual modes, as indeed between different registers of potential, so too might its picture oscillate between different semantic frameworks.

INSERT FIG.12 HERE: Full page

Before explaining what I mean here, it is perhaps worth countering the objection that Optatian was an exclusively 'pagan' author, or that such 'Christian' registers have no place in his poems. When it comes to the cultural milieu in which Optatian was writing in the 320s, such neat modern scholarly polarities prove hopelessly reductive.<sup>93</sup> It is certainly true that overtly 'Christian' references are relatively few and far between within the corpus.<sup>94</sup> Yet the Optatians *signa* fluctuate between different frames of reference, always dependent on the perspective of their viewer-reader. Nowhere is this multivalence more evident than in the cross-shapes that recur in Optatian's *uersus intexti*. In the four *carmina cancellata* emblazoned with chi-rho christograms (poems 8 [Fig. 3], 14, 19 [Fig. 4] and – if genuine – 24), Optatian plays upon the multiple semantics of the motif, above all its combined role as both imperial emblem and Christian sign. Chiastic formations recur elsewhere too, sometimes even radiating out from the centre of the grid, as in the tenth poem [Fig. 12]).<sup>95</sup> Whatever else we make of such designs, it is clear that they were paralleled in other contemporary media, not least Constantinian coins: on a series of bronze examples minted in Thessalonica, we even find an obverse portrait of Constantine paired with the figure of Sol (with globe in his left hand) on top of a structure of overlaid 'X'-formations [Fig. 13];<sup>96</sup> although interpretations of the coin have been contested, it seems to reflect one puzzled attempt to make sense of the chi-rho – this time rendering the figure of Sol himself as an alphabetical rho within the christogram.<sup>97</sup>

INSERT FIG.13 HERE: Column width

Once we approach the poems of Optatian with an eye to Christian symbolism, we find further patterns of possible religious significance within the corpus. The nineteenth poem, with its ship and chi-rho mast/sail [Fig. 4], for example, taps into a favoured Christian motif as well as into the the imagery of the 'ship of state';<sup>98</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Bruhat 1999: 141–6 (quotations from 142, 143). Cf. Pipitone 2012a: 37–8; Bruhat 2008: 9–15.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Squire fthc. a; Squire and Whitton fthc.; cf. also Wienand 2012a: 396–420. More generally on the 'high degree of fluidity, of uncertainty, and of indeterminate positioning between the poles' between 'Christian' and 'pagan' in the literary works of the 310s and 320s, see above all Green 2010 (quotation from 67).

<sup>94</sup> Apart from poems 16 (discussed below [Fig. 14]) and 24 (of contested authenticity), the most overt reference comes in poem 8: here Optatian refers to the 'law of Christ' explicitly (*Christi... lege*, 8.3), and within a poem that uses its *uersus intexti* to embroider the name of *IESUS* around its central chi-rho [Fig. 3].

<sup>95</sup> For one later account of the Christian symbolism inherent in the letter 'X' (which, like the letter 'I', signifies the cross through its shape), see e.g. Isidore, *Etym.* 1.3.11. Later poets would of course imitate and take up such cross-shape forms – and within the context of expressly Christian poems: the best example is Venantius Fortunatus 2.4 (Reydellet 1994: 54–5, with commentary at 182–4); for discussion, see also Higgins 1987: 36.

<sup>96</sup> Bruun 1966: 507, Thessalonica, nos. 66–71 (Fig. 13 = Thessalonica no. 66: London, British Museum inv. B.3915): I am grateful to Richard Abdy for the reference.

<sup>97</sup> For discussions, see Mostecky 1991, Christodoulou 1998: 61, with n.83 and Wienand 2012a: 304–6. The X-shape has also been interpreted – unsatisfactorily, in my view – as a schematic image of a Roman camp, or as steps leading to the base of the statue.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Bruhat 2008: 59–60 (with n.57); Squire and Whitton fthc. More generally on the Christian symbolism of the ship, see e.g. cf. e.g. Bruun 1963: 129–30, Daniélou 1964: 58–70 and Jensen 2000: 138–41.

likewise the palm-frond of poem 9 has at least the potential to bring to mind motifs loaded with potential religious symbolism.<sup>99</sup> Throughout the corpus, Optatian seems aware of such semantic fluctuation – the capacity of his *signa* to slip and slide not only between writing and drawing, but also between different semantic frames. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sixteenth poem, which has plausibly been dated to the first half of the 320s [Fig. 14].<sup>100</sup> Reading the poem's thirty-eight hexameters, we find Constantine invoked as 'lord', 'Roman father', 'splendour of the world', 'glorious light', and 'saviour' (*dominum*, 16.10; *parentem* | *Romanum*, 16.10–11; *decus orbis*, 16.15; *lux inclyta*, 16.21; *saluator*, 16.33). As audiences switch from the horizontal axis to the vertical acrostich and mesostichs, however, they find a different semantic configuration. While the left-hand acrostich dedicates the poem, in Latin, 'to our Lord Constantine, the perpetually August' (*domino nostro Constantino perpetuo Augusto*), the three subsequent mesostichs disguise Greek hexameters, presenting Constantine's 'kingship' as an explicit gift from 'Christ'.<sup>101</sup> In this case, the semantic switch – literalised in the twin movement from horizontal to vertical on one hand, and from Latin to Greek on the other – is echoed in the poet's talk of a 'double voice' (*duplicem... uocem*, 16.6): 'the mind dares to compose dissonant things out of words that are entwined together' (*dissona conexis audet componere uerbis* | ...*mens*, 16.1–2), as Optatian puts it.

INSERT FIG.14 HERE: Full page

It is with this semantic 'dissonance' in view that I approach the *uultus Augusti* of the third poem. As so often with his works, Optatian furnishes no explicit prompt to read the design in Christian terms: with the numerous references to the Muses (vv.1, 8, 13–18, 21, 35), and not least the nods to Phoebus Apollo and Zeus ('gentle ruler of Olympus': *mitis rector Olympi*, v.10),<sup>102</sup> the very fabric of the poem fits squarely within a classical literary tradition. But despite the verbal constituents of the text, the cruciform visual pattern has the potential to lead audiences along a different interpretative path: it tenders the possibility of wholly more figurative modes of interpretation.

INSERT FIG.15 HERE: 2/3 of column width

So what might it mean to associate the *uultus* of Constantine with a twin sign of the cross? At the time when the poem was produced – following Constantine's legendary vision of the Christian *signum* before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in AD 312 – the significance of the cross was of course a live topic.<sup>103</sup> Whatever the

<sup>99</sup> For discussion on poem 9, see Ernst 1991: 127–9; on the palm as an early Christian symbol, see e.g. Bruun 1963: 142–3.

<sup>100</sup> For the date, see Polara 1973: 2.94 (reviewing earlier scholarship), with Barnes 1975: 182 (suggesting AD 324) and Bruhat 1999: 496 (dating the poem between 321 and 323).

<sup>101</sup> 16.ii–iv: νεῖμέν σοι, βασιλεῦ, Χριστὸς καὶ σοῖς τεκέεσσι | τίμιον εὐσεβίης κρατέειν ἀρετῆς τε βραβεῖον | εὐνομίης ἄρχειν τε καὶ Αὐσονίοισιν ἀνάσσειν ('To you and your sons, o King, Christ has conceded – in honour of your piety and as prize for your virtue – the power of rule, a beginning of good governance, and mastery over the Ausonians').

<sup>102</sup> The phrasing might remind one of the *regnator Olympi* of e.g. *Aen.* 2.779, 7.558 and 10.437. For the parallel – and the image of Constantine as Jupiter, cf. Wienand 2012a: 390–2 (with numismatic comparanda).

<sup>103</sup> The precise form of that 'cross' – and the sign that Constantine subsequently emblazoned on the shields of his soldiers – has been endlessly debated: should it be imagined as a staurogram or chi-rho? For discussions, see (from among a substantial bibliography) Sulzberger 1925; Cecchelli 1954: 73–9, 164–5; Burzachechi 1955–56; Dinkler 1967; Black 1970; Bruun 1962: esp. 31–2; Bruun 1997: esp. 43–5; Dinkler-von Schubert 1997: esp. 33–4; Girardet 2010: 52–62; Bardill, 2012: 159–202, esp. pp. 160–8. Astoundingly, none of these discussions have taken Optatian's chi-rho monograms into consideration (cf. Squire and Whitton *ftnc.*).

precise form of the apparition that Constantine allegedly witnessed, we know that the emperor quickly appropriated the chi-rho as personal emblem. Already by the mid-310s, we find it associated with the imperial image on Constantinian coins; indeed, one of the earliest appearances shows it integrated – revealingly, perhaps – within his portrait, as crowing emblem within the helmet [Fig. 15].<sup>104</sup> So enamoured was Constantine with this ‘symbol’ (σύμβολον), according to Eusebius, that he even emblazoned it within his palace (*Vit. Const.* 3.49):<sup>105</sup>

τοσοῦτος δὲ θεῖος ἔρωσ τὴν βασιλέως κατειλήφει ψυχὴν, ὥς ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἀνακτόροις τῶν βασιλείων, κατὰ τὸν πάντων ἐξοχώτατον οἶκον τῆς πρὸς τῷ ὀρόφῳ κεχρυσωμένης φατνώσεως κατὰ τὸ μεσαίτατον, μεγίστου πίνακος ἀνηπλωμένου μέσον ἐμπεπῆχθαι τὸ τοῦ σωτηρίου πάθους σύμβολον ἐκ ποικίλων συγκείμενον καὶ πολυτελῶν λίθων ἐν χρυσῷ πολλῷ κατεργασμένων. φυλακτήριον δὲ ἐδόκει τοῦτο αὐτῆς βασιλείας τῷ θεοφιλεῖ πεποιῆσθαι.

So great a divine passion had seized the Emperor’s soul that in the royal quarters of his imperial palace themselves, on the most eminent building of all – at the very middle of the gilded coffer adjoining the roof, in the centre of a very large panel – had been fixed the emblem of the saving Passion, made up of a variety of precious stones and set in much gold. It seemed to have been made for the God-beloved as a protection for his empire.

The emblem that Eusebius describes here, ‘made up of a variety of precious stones and set in much gold’ (ἐκ ποικίλων συγκείμενον καὶ πολυτελῶν λίθων ἐν χρυσῷ πολλῷ κατεργασμένων) might remind us of those polychrome forms of Optatian, ‘all shining in purple, written with letters that glitter in silver and gold (*ostro tota nitens, argento auroque coruscis* | *scripta notis*...: 1.3–4). But no less important is Eusebius’ talk of the cross as ‘the emblem of the saving passion’ (τὸ τοῦ σωτηρίου πάθους σύμβολον). Just as Eusebius frequently refers to the Christian emblem as a ‘saving sign’ (σωτηρίον σημεῖον), describing how Constantine exploited it in all manner of contexts,<sup>106</sup> so too does Optatian make recourse to a closely related set of terms: in the eighth poem, for example, he alludes to the poem’s emblazoned christogram [Fig. 3] as a *salutari... signo* (8.i); likewise, amid the figured patterns of the nineteenth poem (with its chi-rho of a mast and sail [Fig. 4]), Optatian describes his patterns as ‘heavenly signs’ (*caelestia signa*, 19.1), alluding to the language used by Lactantius to describe the vision of Constantine in AD 312.<sup>107</sup>

If at least some contemporaries were aware of the Christian significance of such cruciform *signa*, they also seem to have been sensitive to the idea of ‘reading’ the face as a Christian cross. By the time Optatian was writing, there was in fact long-standing Judaeo-Christian precedent for the thinking.<sup>108</sup> Already in the second century, Justin Martyr introduced the physiognomy of the face as a demonstration of the universal symbolism of the crucifix. The representation of the cross, writes Justin, is the greatest symbol of God’s power and rule (τὸ μέγιστον σύμβολον τῆς ἰσχύος καὶ ἀρχῆς), and something imitated in all manner of shapes and forms – whether in the

<sup>104</sup> On Fig. 15 (= Bruun 1966: 364, Ticinum no. 36) see Overbeck 2005; Bardill 2012: 177–8; and Bleckmann 2015: 324–7; on ‘Constantine and Christianity’ on Constantinian coinage more generally, cf. Bruun 1966: 61–4.

<sup>105</sup> Translation adapted from Cameron and Hall 1999: 140.

<sup>106</sup> See especially Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.28–32; *Hist. eccl.* 9.9.10–11; *Tric. or.* 9–10.

<sup>107</sup> For Lactantius’ delineation of the ‘heavenly sign’ (*caeleste signum*) seen by Constantine before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, see *De mort. pers.* 44.5.

<sup>108</sup> For discussion, see now Barton 2015 (analyzing the metaphor of the face in St. Paul’s letters, especially at 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 2:18 and 2 Cor. 4:6).

mast of the ship, the plough that tills the land or the military banner. But the most significant manifestation of this Christian revelation could be seen in the human face itself (*Apol.* 1.55.4–5).<sup>109</sup>

τὸ δὲ ἀνθρώπειον σχῆμα οὐδένι ἄλλῳ τῶν ἀλόγων ζώων διαφέρει, ἢ τῷ ὀρθόν τε εἶναι καὶ ἔκτασιν χειρῶν ἔχειν καὶ ἐν τῷ προσώπῳ ἀπὸ τοῦ μετωπίου τεταμένον τὸν λεγόμενον μυζωτῆρα φέρειν, δι’ οὗ ἢ τε ἀναπνοή ἐστι τῷ ζώῳ, καὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλο δείκνυσιν ἢ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ σταυροῦ. καὶ διὰ τοῦ προφήτου δὲ ἐλέχθη οὕτως· Πνεῦμα πρὸ προσώπου ἡμῶν Χριστὸς κύριος.

And the human form differs from that of the irrational animals in nothing else than in its being erect and having the hands extended, and having on the face extending from the forehead what is called the nose, through which there is respiration for the living creature; and this shows no other form than that of the cross. And so it was said by the prophet: ‘the breath before our face is the Lord Christ’.

According to Justin, the crux of the nose reflects ‘no other form than that of the cross’ (οὐδὲν ἄλλο δείκνυσιν ἢ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ σταυροῦ); indeed, it is through this cruciform shape, Justin adds, that we draw our life-breath – the spiritual *pneuma* through which Christ is made manifest. This text is not alone in comparing the face with the sign of the cross. Just as Justin sees the human *prosôpon* as a cruciform apparition, so too could other authors approach the face as a site for ‘inscribing’ saving insignia. In the Revelation of Saint John, for example, it is the signs written on the face that segregate the saved from the damned (Rev. 7:3, 9:4, 14:1). According to the apocalyptic narrative that ensues, itself harking back to Old Testament precedent (above all Ezekiel 9:4–6),<sup>110</sup> a *sphragis* on the forehead could suffice to seal the fate of those spared from damnation, marking them with the ‘name of the Father of Christ written/ drawn on their foreheads’ (τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ γεγραμμένον ἐπὶ τῶν μετώπων αὐτῶν, Rev. 14:1).

There is precedent, then, for treating the face as Christian sign, as well as a site for ‘sealing’ subjects with the mark of Christian salvation. But is there any evidence for associating the cross with the face of Constantine specifically? The parallels discussed above might not perhaps add up to much were it not for some additional testimony, preserved again in *The Life of Constantine*. So enamoured was Constantine with Christ’s ‘saving sign’ (σωτηρίῳ... σημείῳ), Eusebius relays, that the emperor openly ‘impressed’ his face with it (*Vit. Const.* 3.2.2).<sup>111</sup>

καὶ τί νεώτερον ἦν <ἢ> τὸ θαῦμα τῆς βασιλέως ἀρετῆς ἐκ θεοῦ σοφίας τῷ θνητῷ γένει δεδωρημένον; τοιγάρτοι τὸν Χριστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σὺν παρρησίᾳ τῇ πάσῃ πρεσβεύων εἰς πάντας διετέλει, μηδ’ <ἐν> ἐγκαλυπτόμενος τὴν σωτήριον ἐπιγορίαν, σεμνολογούμενος δ’ ἐπὶ τῷ πράγματι, φανερόν δὲ αὐτὸ καθίστη, νῦν μὲν τὸ πρόσωπον τῷ σωτηρίῳ κατασφραγιζόμενος σημείῳ, νῦν δ’ ἐναβρυνόμενος τῷ νικητικῷ τροπαίῳ.

And what could have been more novel than the marvel of the Emperor’s virtue, bestowed by God’s wisdom on mankind? For he continually announced the Christ of God with complete openness to all, in no way concealing the title of the

<sup>109</sup> Translation after Barnard 1997: 62–3; for analysis of this passage and others, see Sulzberger 1925: 354–66, esp. 355–7.

<sup>110</sup> For the Hebrew letter tau here as an anticipation of the cross-shaped letter tau, see e.g. Jensen 2000: 137; cf. Daniélou 1964: 136–45 and Ferguson 2009: 196.

<sup>111</sup> Translation adapted from Cameron and Hall 1999: 121–2. On the relevance of the passage for approaching the poem of Optatian, see Bruhat 1999: 143 and Bruhat 2009: 117.

Saviour, but instead taking pride in the practice. He made himself quite plain, at one time sealing his face with a saving sign, at another proudly delighting in the victorious trophy.

Quite what to make of this account is unclear: Eusebius may be referring to some material insignia that Constantine wore or inscribed on his face, or else (perhaps more likely) to the performed act of making the sign of the cross.<sup>112</sup> In any event, the image of Constantine ‘sealing’ his face with the saving sign of the cross (τὸ πρόσωπον τῷ σωτηρίῳ κατασφραγιζόμενος σημείῳ) takes us back to the imagery of the Book of Revelation. As Franz Josef Dölger long ago demonstrated in his foundational study of the *sphragis* as ‘altchristliche Taufbezeichnung’, the image of ‘sealing’ with the sign of the cross was, by the fourth century, synonymous with the act of baptism: to christen a subject was to ‘seal’ the physical body with the saving sign, impressing it with the character of Christian salvation.<sup>113</sup> The metaphor was widespread in the fourth century, and it would later be played out in the act of chiselling the sign of the cross onto the head of ‘pagan’ statues [e.g. Fig. 16].<sup>114</sup> But it is perhaps no coincidence that the same image seals our poem in turn: at the literal and figurative crux the poem is stamped with the idea of poetically ‘sealing’ the golden age of the emperor (*uersu consignans aurea saecla*, 3.vi).<sup>115</sup>

**INSERT FIG.16 HERE: half column**

Immediately after the passage cited above, Eusebius continues his *Life of Constantine* with a further association between the emperor’s ‘face’ (τὸ πρόσωπον) and the ‘saving sign’ (σωτήριον σημείον) of the Christian cross. According to Eusebius, the same emblem – set within a high panel before the entrance to the palace, and ‘for the eyes of all to see’ (τοῖς πάντων ὀφθαλμοῖς ὁρᾶσθαι) – was painted above the heads of the emperor and his two sons, this time within an allegorical picture that showed Constantine vanquishing the devilish forces of a dragon: the painting depicted the ‘saving sign’ directly over Constantine’s head (τὸ μὲν σωτήριον σημείον... τῆς αὐτοῦ κεφαλῆς, 3.3.1), we are told, thereby demonstrating how the emperor vanquished his enemy ‘through the power of the saving trophy set above his head’ (δυνάμει τοῦ ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς ἀνακειμένου σωτηρίου τροπαίου, 3.3.2). Whatever this painting might have looked like, the important point lies once again in the assimilation – at least for a Christian apologist like Eusebius – between the projected face of the emperor and the symbolic shape of the cross.<sup>116</sup>

All this has a particular relevance for approaching the purported *uultus* of our poem. Unlike the ‘saving sign’ discussed by Eusebius, ‘in no way concealed’ by Constantine (μηδ<έν> ἐγκαλυπτόμενος), the potential Christian significance of these two intersecting crosses calls for active deciphering: Optatian does not ‘openly’ (φανερὸν) display the significance, but instead relies upon a reader-viewer’s capacity to transform abstract geometric pattern into pregnant symbol. What is needed, in

<sup>112</sup> Cf. the commentary of Cameron and Hall 1999: 255, comparing *V. Ant.* 13.5, 78.5.

<sup>113</sup> Dölger 1911: esp. 171–9; the most detailed discussion is now Ferguson 2009 – discussing the ‘sealing’ analogy (and the signing of the forehead) at e.g. 218–20, 297–8, 459, 485–7, 524.

<sup>114</sup> For discussion of such cases, see Dölger 1930 – along with Hjort 1993 and the numerous examples analyzed in Kristensen 2013; on Fig. 16, and the ‘demise of paganism’ at Ephesus, see Closs 1979: 32.

<sup>115</sup> For the cross as ‘seal’, compare also Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 2.55.1: within a letter from Constantine supposedly dispatched to the eastern provinces, the emperor tells how he has ‘led a conquering army that makes you seal his protection everywhere’ (τὴν σὴν σφραγίδα πανταχοῦ προβαλλόμενος καλλινίκου ἡγησάμην στρατοῦ, 2.55.1)

<sup>116</sup> On this lost encaustic painting, see Mango 1959: 23–4, along with the commentary of Cameron and Hall 1999: 255–6.

short, is an active leap of the imagination: in the terms of Richard Wollheim, such an interpretation requires viewers not to ‘see as’ but rather to ‘see in’; the schematic outline accordingly serves a stepping-stone for an intellectual sort of insight, one that trumps physical vision by ‘uploading’ into the a significance beyond face-values.<sup>117</sup> Although they could not of course fall back on Wollheim’s terminology, Optatian and his contemporaries did have a related critical language, not least a distinction – as most famously articulated in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by the Elder Philostratus – between *phantasia* and *mimêsis*.<sup>118</sup> Like the ‘cloud-paintings’ discussed by Philostratus (*VA* 2.22), the figurative outline of our poem invites respondents to make creative sense of the abstract design: it goads us into thinking about the significance of the shape by thinking beyond what can physically be seen.

Such interplay between image and imagination also leads back to the fluctuation between words for reading and images for seeing. As we follow the verses that make up the fabric of the poetic apparition, we find numerous allusions to acts of mental agility and imagination: this is a poem that reiteratively emphasizes ‘reason’ (*ratio*, v.3) and ‘mind’ (*mentem inspiras*, v.7; *mentem*, v.19; *tota mente fideque*, v.22; *mens*, v.31); likewise, in vv.28–30, Optatian explicitly introduces the idea that it is ‘a wondrous work of the mind, to weave a song into verses in various directions’ (*mentis opus mirum metris intexere carmen | ad uarios cursus*); the subsequent talk of the mind being ‘trapped in narrow confine’ (*arto in limite clausa*, v.29) is further related back to the ‘knotted visions’ of the art in which this figure itself appears (*nodosos uisus artis*, v.30). Just as Optatian introduces his own composition as a creative wonder, so too might our modes of poetic and pictorial response amount to a *mentis opus* – an intellectual work that weaves the *nodosos uisus* into meaningful insight: as the central cruciform lines of the *uersus intexti* remind us, the ‘great things’ promised by the poem must actively be ‘sought’ (*grandia quaerentur*).<sup>119</sup>

In that connection, it is worth returning one last time to the opening word of our poem: *fingerere*. As we have said, the verb applies to the act of physical crafting – of fashioning something into a three-dimensional shape – as well as to associated creations of literary composition. But like the Greek verb *πλάττειν*, the verb *fingerere* can also refer to an act of imaginary visualization – that is, of conjuring up a mental picture in the mind’s eye.<sup>120</sup> Right from the very outset, and in a deeply programmatic way, Optatian inscribes his poem with an ambiguity about its art of fabrication. Moreover, he invites his reader-viewers to continue – in their own mind’s eye – his own creative process: while forging an image, Optatian nonetheless leaves it to his audience to endow his emblem with insightful meaning.

## V. Conclusion: Viewing and reading the portraiture of Constantine

<sup>117</sup> Wollheim 1980: esp. 80.

<sup>118</sup> On *VA* 2.22 and 6.19, see especially Birmelin 1933: 153–80, 392–414; Onians 1980: 12–4; Miles 2009: 147–56. For debates about *phantasia* and *mimêsis*, as refracted through the *Imagines* and other works of the Elder Philostratus, see Squire 2013b: esp. 101–4; cf. also Koortbojian 2005.

<sup>119</sup> On the whole history of conceptualizing ‘imagination’ in antiquity, see now Sheppard 2014; for Optatian’s place within that history, cf. the preliminary comments in Moreschini 2013: 597–617.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. *OLD* s.v. ‘*fingerere*’ 8a, with Hose 1996: esp. 271–3. For the puns on *πλάττειν* in the context of Greek epigrams on artworks, see Männlein-Robert 2007a: 90–3 (with references to the further literature) and Squire 2010a: 604; cf. Webb 2009: 169 on the language of *πλάττειν*/*fingerere* in ancient rhetoric, emphasising the ambiguous suggestions of both narrative invention and lying (the most important contribution remains Barwick 1928). For an excellent introduction to ancient thinking about ‘fiction’ more generally, see now Halliwell 2015 (with more detailed bibliographic review).



I do not mean to suggest that a Christian interpretation provides the *only* way of making sense of our poem, still less of reading its ‘portrait’. As I have emphasised, Optatian’s works play upon multiple and layered levels of meaning; they give combined verbal and visual form to an inherent interpretative instability. But if, as I have suggested, this artefact confronts its audience with a visual puzzle, my argument has been that a Christian perspective might offer one possible response – a response, moreover, that develops various aspects of the text’s own verbal fabric.<sup>121</sup> Whether or not one agrees with my ‘reading’, I hope to have shown that Optatian offers a fascinating lens through which to revisit fourth-century Roman portraiture: on the one hand, this poem demonstrates the self-reflexive sophistication with which Roman portraits could be thought about in late antiquity; on the other, both poem and poet open up new vistas into the political, religious and intellectual history of Constantine’s principate.

Allow me to end on a different note. Throughout this article, I have touched upon the interconnections between the poems of Optatian and contemporary visual culture. But how, one might ask, does this purported ‘portrait’ relate to extant images of Constantine, above all those found on Constantinian coins and statues? Needless to say, extant images of Constantine hardly resemble the schematic form of Optatian’s diagram. But in its invitation to look *beyond* material form, and to probe different modes of symbolic and allegorical meaning, our poem may perhaps speak to one important aspect of Constantinian portraiture.

As we have already said, one of the most striking features of Constantine’s portraiture – at least from the 310s onwards – is the emphasis on the subject’s upward gaze. Sculptors made a point of incising the irises and pupils of the emperor’s eyes, and contemporary coin-impressions developed the effect through an upward turn of the neck. The famous marble portrait of Constantine in the Metropolitan Museum – which is probably more or less contemporary with Optatian’s poem – nicely demonstrates the point [Fig. 17]: with his gaze focused above, Constantine is made to avert his look from the earthly realm (and indeed his viewer), fixing it instead on a higher plane.<sup>122</sup>

**INSERT FIG.17 HERE: Full page**

Now, Constantine was of course not the first emperor to exploit this iconographic motif: inscribed pupils and irises, made to look upwards, can already be found in the third quarter of the third century, not least in the imperial portraiture of

<sup>121</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting that Optatian’s mediaeval successors *do* seem to have read the pattern of our poem in expressly Christian terms. Although Optatian’s complex Carolingian reception is too big a subject to be addressed here (cf. above, n.XX), there can be no doubt that Rabanus Maurus knew Optatian’s *uultus Augusti* poem, reconfiguring it in his ninth-century *De laudibus sanctae crucis* (for a general introduction, see Ernst 1991: 222–332; for the debts to Optatian, cf. Polara 1978: 347 n.61, Ernst 1991: 109 and Bruhat 1999: 143–4; the most recent bibliography is surveyed by Ganz 2013). In one picture-poem, we find Rabanus Maurus drawing on a closely related visual schema within a Christian celebration of its cruciform shapes (criss-crossed with the verses *In cruce nunc menses, uenti, duodenaque signa. | Grex et apostolicus decoratur luce corusca*: see Ernst 1991: 228–32, with 230, Fig. 67; cf. Bruhat 1999: 143–4); in others, the poet delivered on Optatian’s original promise to paint a picture of his imperial honorand – whether revealing Louis the Pious as a fully-fledged Roman Christian emperor (Ernst 1991: 292–7, with 294, Fig. 93), or else fashioning a portrait of Louis’ second wife, Judith of Bavaria (Ernst 1991: 297–300, with 299, Fig. 94).

<sup>122</sup> On Constantine’s ‘heavenward gaze’, see Bardill 2012: 19–24. Bardill discusses Fig. 17 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 26.229) at 22, offering a much more detailed bibliographic guide: the portrait was evidently re-cut after a Trajanic model (see Schäfer 1999, along more generally with Varner 2014: 63–4 and 2015: 79–83).



Gallienus.<sup>123</sup> But Constantine's contemporaries were the first to make a programmatic point about this visual feature, associating it with a particular cosmology (sometimes connected with the Christian outlook of the emperor).<sup>124</sup> According to Eusebius, Constantine 'arrayed himself in the image of heavenly sovereignty, directing his gaze upwards and governing those below according to the archetypal form' (τῆς οὐρανόου βασιλείας εἰκόνι κεκοσμημένος, ἄνω βλέπων κατὰ τὴν ἀρχέτυπον ἰδέαν τοὺς κάτω διακυβερνῶν ἰθύνει, *Tricennial Oration* 3.5). In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius went even further – commenting not only on the emperor's upward gaze, but also his ban on worshipping the emperor's image (*Vit. Const.* 4.15–16).<sup>125</sup>

Ὅση δ' αὐτοῦ τῇ ψυχῇ πίστεως ἐνθέου ὑπεστήρικτο δύναμις, μάθοι ἂν τις καὶ ἐκ τοῦδε λογιζόμενος, ὥς ἐν τοῖς χρυσοῖς νομίσμασι τὴν αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ εἰκόνα ὧδε γράφεσθαι διετύπου, ὥς ἄνω βλέπειν δοκεῖν ἀνατεταμένου πρὸς θεὸν τρόπον εὐχομένου. τούτου μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐκτυπώματα καθ' ὅλης τῆς Ῥωμαίων διέτρεχεν οἰκουμένης. ἐν αὐτοῖς δὲ βασιλείοις κατὰ τινὰς πόλεις ἐν ταῖς εἰς τὸ μετέωρον τῶν προπύλων ἀνακειμέναις εἰκόσιν ἐστὼς ὄρθιος ἐγράφετο, ἄνω μὲν εἰς οὐρανὸν ἐμβλέπων, τῷ χεῖρι δ' ἐκτεταμένος εὐχομένου σχήματι. ὧδε μὲν οὖν αὐτὸς ἑαυτὸν κἂν ταῖς γραφαῖς εὐχόμενον ἀνίστη. νόμῳ δ' ἀπεῖργεν εἰκόνας αὐτοῦ εἰδώλων ἐν ναοῖς ἀνατίθεςθαι, ὥς μηδὲ μέχρι σκιαγραφίας τῇ πλάνῃ τῶν ἀπειρημένων μολύνειτο <ἢ γραφή>.

The great strength of the divinely inspired faith fixed in his soul might also be deduced by considering the fact that he had his own portrait so depicted on the gold coinage that he appeared to look upwards in the manner of one reaching out to God in prayer. Impressions of this type were circulated throughout the entire Roman world. In the imperial quarters of various cities, in the images erected above the entrances, he was portrayed standing up, looking up to heaven, his hands extended in a posture of prayer. Such was the way he would have himself depicted praying in works of graphic art. But by law he forbade images of himself to be set up in idol-shrines, so that he might not be contaminated by the error of replicating forbidden things.

A related sentiment can be found in Constantine's *Oration to the Saints* – a purported Greek translation of a speech delivered by the emperor in Latin, and preserved as an appendage to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*: the emperor is said to have declared that 'the only power in man which can be elevated to a comparison with that of God' (μόνη... ἀντίρροπος θεοῦ δυνάμεως ἀνθρωπίνη δύναμις) comes from 'raising our affections above the things of earth, and directing our thoughts, as far as we may, to high and heavenly objects (τὸ μὴ εἰς γῆν νενευκέναι ἀλλ', ὅση δύναμις, τὴν διάνοιαν ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρθιά τε καὶ ὑψηλὰ ἀναβιβάζειν, *Orat.* 14). If Constantine here tenders an intellectual rationale for approaching the iconography of his portraits, other

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Matthew 1943: 67–8 – and the broader discussions of L'Orange 1947: esp. 95–129, L'Orange 1965: esp. 31–3, 110–25 and Wood 1986 (on 'the emergence of an abstract style' and the 'victory of abstraction' in third-century portraiture).

<sup>124</sup> As Wienand 2012a: 395 concludes, 'die christliche Lesart war also eine mögliche, aber keine zwingende Deutung der schillernden Semantik des neuen Herrscherbildes'; cf. Hannestad 2001: 98, on how, 'in imperial art of the Constantinian era, the same symbol, type of portrait etc. can be interpreted very differently indeed'.

<sup>125</sup> My translation follows Cameron and Hall 1999: 158–9, but departs from their rendition of the closing clause ('so that he might not be contaminated by the error of forbidden things even in replica'): with this reference to σκιαγραφίας τῇ πλάνῃ, Eusebius frames the passage in the loaded language of art criticism, and not least Platonic thinking about images (for the term, see Rouveret 1989: esp. 24–6 and most recently Tanner 2016: 115–21).

contemporary writers went still further. Take the following passage from the *Divine Institutes* of Lactantius (1.25):<sup>126</sup>

*quanto satius est, spretis inanibus, ad Deum te conuertere, tueri statum, quem a Deo acceperis, tueri nomen! idcirco enim ἄνθρωπος, quia sursum spectat, nominatur: sursum autem spectat, qui Deum uerum et uiuum, qui est in coelo, suspicit, qui artificem, qui parentem animae suae non modo sensu ac mente, uerum etiam uultu et oculis sublimibus quaerit. qui autem se terrenis humilibusque substernit, utique illud, quod est inferius, sibi praefert. nam, cum ipse opus Dei sit, simulacrum autem opus hominis, non potest humanum opus diuino anteponi. et sicut Deus hominis parens est, ita simulacri homo. stultus igitur et amens, qui adorat quod ipse fabricauit; cuius artificii detestabilis et inepti auctor fuit Prometheus, patruo Iouis Iapeto natus...*

How much better to despise lifeless idols and turn to the living God, to preserve that station assigned you by Him, and so uphold your name as ‘man’! A man is called *anthrôpos* because his gaze is upward. He gazes upward who looks to the true and living God, who is in heaven; who seeks the maker and parent of his soul not merely by feeling and intellect but with uplifted countenance and eyes. He who submits himself to the base things of this world obviously chooses what is beneath him; for, since he is God’s handiwork, whereas an image is man’s handiwork, the human handiwork cannot be preferred to the divine. And as God is the creator of man, so is man the creator of the image. He is beside himself who adores what his hands have made – of which the hateful and stupid Prometheus son of Iapetus, uncle of Jupiter, was the author...

Although Lactantius is not discussing the emperor explicitly in this passage, his image of the person who ‘gazes upwards’ and ‘looks to the true and living God... with uplifted countenance and eyes’ (*sursum autem spectat, qui Deum uerum et uiuum... uultu et oculis sublimibus*) speaks directly to Constantinian portraiture: it offers one Christian interpretation of the imperial gaze configured in the portraits of the emperor. Still more significantly, perhaps, this discussion of ‘looking upwards’ comes in the context of an express repudiation of all manmade imagery. Couching his polemic in deeply Platonic terms, Lactantius advises us to look upward rather than to mortal artworks, since human handiwork can only lead us to things that are ‘earthly and base’ (*terrenis humilibusque*).<sup>127</sup>

Such anti-materialist rhetoric provides a final lens for ‘reading’ the *uultus* of Optatian’s poem. For perhaps the ultimate way in which the page ‘will dare outdo Apellean waxes’ lies in its apparent ascendance above material *mimêsis*. Where classical traditions of painting ground us in the material world (at least according to the polemic of Lactantius), Optatian invites us to direct our gaze upwards – and onto a higher intellectual plane. From an archaeologist’s perspective, Optatian certainly figures a very different portrait of Constantine. In its games of sight and insight,

<sup>126</sup> Translation adapted from Blakeney 1950: 73–4.

<sup>127</sup> It would be tempting, of course, to relate such Neoplatonic thinking to the stylistic shifts that come to a head in fourth-century visual culture: particularly influential is L’Orange 1965, arguing that, above all under Constantine, ‘figurative art moves from the animated forms of nature towards a firm and inflexible typology, from plastic articulation to conceptual image, from body to symbol’ (128); the master disentangling of this knotty nexus of issues remains Elsner 1995.

however, our artefact might be seen to draw upon a sentiment at the crux of Constantinian portraiture itself.<sup>128</sup>

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